YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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# **SEFER Tehillim**

**by Rav Elchanan Samet**

**Lecture 51: "You have made them all in wisdom"**

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

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

### 4. Section 8 (vv. 27-30) – "Who portions out life for all living beings"

(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.

According to Weiss, this section constitutes a continuation of verse 24 (which we have called section 6); this is evident both in its language and its contents. Contents-wise, this section no longer deals with a particular element in creation (e.g., the streams and the creatures that benefit from them, or the night and the day and the creatures that depend on the rotation between them), but rather with the totality of created beings, those living on land and those living in the sea, those mentioned in the psalm and those not mentioned there. Verse 24 also embraced all of creation in the excited, summarizing cry: "How great are Your works, O Lord! You have made them all in wisdom." Linguistically, the word "*kulam*" ("all of them") at the beginning of section 8 ("**All of them**wait upon You") corresponds to the same word in verse 24, "You have made **them all**in wisdom," and this connection alludes to the fact that God's wisdom in creation also reveals itself in the way that He takes care of His creatures, as described in our section.

As Weiss says: "Verses 25-26 should be seen as a parenthetical section inserted incidentally to the clause, ‘**The earth** is full of Your creatures.’"[[1]](#footnote-1)

Let us begin to explain the intent of this section by asking: What is the novelty of this section in relation to what was stated thus far in the psalm? Surely beforehand the world was also described as having been created by God ("He established the earth," "He made the moon," and the like), and as being governed by way of His perpetual actions ("He sends the springs," "He waters the mountains," "You put down darkness," and the like). What, then, is added in section 8?

This is the way Weiss summarizes this section, at the same time answering our question:

(27) "All of them wait upon You, to give them their food in its season" – Thus far a description was given of the purposefulness of creation, testifying to the wisdom of the Creator, in the mutual dependency between all parts of creation. Each creature serves another, offering and receiving help, and all the particulars join together to form the whole. **This regularity in nature is not at all self-evident.** This mutual help is not self-propelled; **the maintenance of the world is not a mechanical result of creation**. All of the created beings that depend upon each other depend upon the free will of the Creator. As we have thus far seen how each one extends a hand and helps another, so too we now see how they all lift up their eyes to God and await his help, based on their knowledge of their dependency upon Him, and their knowledge of Him upon whom they depend. There is no created being who does not know this. Not only do "the young lions roar for their prey, and seek food from God" (v. 21), but rather "All of them wait upon You, to give them their food in its season."

Until now, our psalm described the maintenance of life as dependent on **general** actions of God: plants, animals and man depend upon the rain that God causes to fall; the night animals depend upon the darkness that God sets upon the earth. Not only are these acts of God general in nature, but they are also **guaranteed** as part of the mechanism of creation, for without them the world would not survive for even a minute. Our section, on the other hand, describes the **particular** dependence of each and every creature on his Creator. Each creature's existence depends upon God's relationship with it, and upon His readiness to provide it with its food. This individual relationship, by its very nature, is not guaranteed to last forever. On the contrary, the existence of each creature is limited in time; when the time comes, God withholds what it needs and thus its existence comes to an end.

Thus far, the world has been described in our psalm as a world that is filled with the joy of life of the various creatures – of the birds that sound their voices from among the trees' branches; of man, whose food that he toils to prepare gladdens his heart and brightens his face; and of the playful leviathan, enjoying itself in the sea. In this section, however, an element of alarm and distress enters into the description of the world's creatures:

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

You take away their breath, they die,

and return to their dust.

Why does our psalm, which is an ode of thanksgiving for the preservation of the world and its creatures, make mention of the very opposite – death and demise?

In order to answer this question, Weiss compares what is stated in this section (in verses 27-29) to what is stated in a similar passage in psalm 145. This comparison serves Weiss as a valuable exegetical tool; highlighting the differences between the two similar passages sharpens the specific issue of each passage and the correspondence between the specific issue and the particular elements contained in the passage in accordance with the objective and idea of that issue.

Even though the citation is long, we have brought it in its entirety, both because it provides the necessary explanation of this section and because of the methodological importance of the comparative tool, illustrated here in brilliant form:

In order to reach a better understanding of the verse, we shall once again make use of a comparison. Let us compare verses 27-29 to their parallels in *Tehillim* 145:15-16:

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| Psalm 104 | Psalm 145 |
| (27) **All of them** wait upon You,  **to give** them their food in its season. | **The eyes of all** await You,  and **You give them** their food in its time. |
| (28) You give them, they gather it.  **You open Your hand**, they are filled with good. | **You open Your hand**, and You satisfy the desire of every living thing. |
| (29) You hide Your face, they are terrified.  You take away their breath, they die…. | ---- |

This comparison demonstrates a striking similarity between the two passages in these psalms. Most scholars see this as following from the fact that the author of psalm 145 made use of the verses in our psalm. But even if this is the case, the author of psalm 145 merely used our verses as raw material, which were developed, polished and matched to the unique idea expressed in his psalm. For the two accounts are similar, but not identical. Our psalm states: "**All of them** wait upon You," whereas psalm 145 states: "**The eyes of all** await You." This difference results from a difference in perspective upon the world. As stated, our psalm reflects a theo-centric perspective, whereas psalm 145's approach is anthropocentric. An anthropocentric approach allows for the feeling of a more intimate relationship, which expresses itself in the manner of formulation: "**The eyes of all** await You" (compare, "So are our eyes to the Lord our God;" *Tehillim* 123:1-2).

Even more characteristic, however, are the other differences between the accounts in the two psalms. What is noted in psalm 145 as a given ("and You give them") is expressed in our psalm as the objective – as something that is sought ("to give them"). For the author of psalm 145, there is only one possibility - "You open Your hand, and satisfy" - whereas according to our psalm, this is just one of various possibilities. While the possibility is found here of "You give them, they gather it," this possibility is not guaranteed. It is merely a possibility, as is already evident from the form of the verb, or to be more precise, by the grammatical function of the clause ("*titen*," rather than "*noten;*" and the clause is conditional, rather than indicative), and as is also expressed in the continuation, in verse 29: "You hide Your face, they are terrified." In our psalm, there are two levels in the account of the Creator's concern for His creatures: "You give them, they gather it," and "You open Your hand, they are filled with good." In the best case, when "You open Your hand" – "**they are filled** with good." But in psalm 145, the only possibility is: "**And You satisfy** the desire of every living thing." That is to say, each one, in accordance with its desire, the quality that it desires and the quantity that it desires. And furthermore, here, "they are filled" ("*yisba'un*") - the satisfaction results from their activity, whereas there, "You satisfy" ("*masbi'a*") – only God is active in their satisfaction.

These differences between the two accounts follow from the difference in the intention of the two psalms. Psalm 145 wishes to emphasize that with respect to the maintenance of each living creature, there are no differences and no qualifications. The psalm is a psalm about God's **goodness**. Accordingly, it does not allow for the possibility that God would withhold a person's sustenance and fail to provide for him in accordance with his desire. In our psalm, on the other hand, the psalmist praises God for His **wisdom**, as it is reflected in the purposefulness of creation. One manifestation of Divine wisdom is that the hopes of the creatures are answered in different ways in accordance with need and as befits all of creation, and not in accordance with the varied and contradictory desires of the particulars of creation. Fulfilling hopes and desires is not the only possible answer on the part of the Creator. The possibility exists that the general purposefulness demands of Divine wisdom not to give to a particular creature. It is even possible that "You hide Your face, they are terrified" (v. 29), like people (*Tehillim* 30:8). What is more, "You take away their breath, they die and return to their dust." But in the created world, the sentence does not come to an end; there is no period: "You send forth Your breath, they are created, and You renew the face of the earth" (v. 30).

The wisdom of God that reveals itself in creation dictates the demise of every creature when its time comes. According to our psalm, death is not a blemish on creation; on the contrary, it is a vital part of the life cycle, and one of the manifestations that "You have made them all in wisdom."

Later in his article, Weiss brings the view of modern commentators, who defined our psalm as "sort of a symphony on the verse, 'And God saw everything that He had made, and behold, it was very good' (*Bereishit* 1:31)." These commentators certainly never imagined the following comment of the *Bereishit Rabbah* (9:5):

In R. Meir's Torah it was written, "And, behold it was very good ('*tov me'od*')" – "And, behold, death is good" (“*tov mavet”*).[[2]](#footnote-2)

The verse under discussion was stated by the Creator with the completion of creation at the end of the sixth day. R. Meir says that the completion of creation, that which turned it into something very good, is death!

Our psalm, after reviewing all parts of creation, finally comes to praise the Creator. How does it praise Him? With the return of His creatures to their dust!

In order to understand this, we must continue reading this section to the end. The last verse states:

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

and You renew the face of the earth.

The Radak explains this verse as follows:

These will die and others will be born in their place. Thus it is written: "One generation passes away, and another generation comes" (*Kohelet* 1:4). The species remains while the individuals perish. And it says: "And renew the face of the earth" regarding those who will be born and newly arrive in the world.

According to this explanation, the words, "And You renew the face of the earth" mean: You bring about the appearance of new life on the face of the earth. Weiss proposes a different explanation of this verse, which deepens its meaning:

The verb "*chadesh*" is not used here as it is used today, its original sense having been forgotten. In our verse, the verb does not denote giving a new form to something old, turning it into something new. This follows from the verb, "*yibare'un*," "they are created," in the first clause, which should be understood as paralleling the verb, "*u-techadesh*" (compare: "Create ('*bera*') in me a clean heart, O God, and renew ('*chadesh*') a steadfast spirit within me" – *Tehillim* 51:12). As we know, the verb "*bara*" is used exclusively for Divine creation; its subject is always God…

From here it follows that the verse "*u-techadesh*…" means to say, make something that did not exist before. What is the new thing that the verse says that God will make? "The face of the earth ('*adama*')." We cannot understand this term without considering the fact that this is the only instance of the word "*adama*" in our psalm, while the word "*eretz*" appears seven times.[[3]](#footnote-3) Therefore, the term "*penei adama*" should not be understood here as it is understood elsewhere in Scripture, as synonymous with "*penei aretz*."

The precise meaning of the expression "*penei adama*" becomes clear when we stand the two parts of our verse against the two parts of the previous verse:

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| (29) 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. |

Substantively, the two verses stand in contrasting parallelism. The expression "*penei adama*" corresponds to the word "*afar*," "dust;" "*penei adama"* means "dust." It is the dust that God renews, that is to say, it is from the dust that God creates something new. He creates a body for a spirit that He sends. That is to say, what is related in *Bereishit* 2:7, that God created man from "**dust of the ground** (*afar min ha-adama*) and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul" – our psalmist applies to all living things. And that which is reported in *Bereishit* as a one-time occurrence, our psalmist sees as a perpetual phenomenon. Accordingly, the Radak's explanation of our verse does not exhaust the depth of its meaning, "These will die and others will be born in their place," for the verse does not speak of the birth of others, but rather of the creation of others. Birth is perceived here as new creation; and creation, according to our psalm, is not a one-time, primal act. God in His wisdom renews the act of creation every moment.

To the words of Weiss, I wish to add as follows. The parallelism between verse 29 and verse 30 teaches that the "*penei adama*" that God renews is the dust - not just any dust, but the dust to which the creatures returned when their spirit was gathered to God. In other words, the dust taken from the ground is the foundation of the original creation of God's creatures. All creatures return to this dust, and from this dust itself the Creator creates new creatures. The world is governed by the "law of the conservation of dust:" the same dust which at the time of a creature's creation turned into a body that housed a spirit, and which turned once again into dust when the creature died, is what serves as the basis of the renewal and continuation of the creation, when a new creature arises to which God sends the breath of life.[[4]](#footnote-4)

It turns out, then, that the death of God's creatures and their return to their dust serve as the foundation for the renewed creation of additional creatures! A world without death is a world of stagnation: there is no renewal of creation, and so there is no development or progress.

When R. Meir expounds the verse "And, behold it was very good ('*tov me'od*')" – "And, behold, death is good ('*tov mavet*')," he means to say that the creation in itself, when it was finished on the sixth day, was still not very good as long as there was no possibility for development and progress. These depend upon a supersedence of generations, a cycle of life and death and renewed life. Accordingly, death was a crucial component of creation, which allowed it to be dynamic. Only then could it be said about creation that it was “very good.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

In this section as well, and perhaps particularly in this section, the wisdom of God who created His creatures in this manner reveals itself.[[6]](#footnote-6) And here, too, God's wisdom reveals itself in differentiation; this time the differentiation is between a creature's time to live and his time to die and return to his dust – the differentiation between life and death in the biography of each and every creature.

Just as we demonstrated in the previous sections, this section the differentiation between life and death is not absolute, for every living creature is fated to die, and the death of all creatures serves as the foundation for new life which God creates in His world.

(To be continued.)

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. a. It must be added that by way of the parenthetical section regarding the sea, not only does the psalmist correct the limitation in his previous cry, "the earth is full of Your creatures," but he also bestows broader significance on the section that follows, "All of them wait upon you," which now relates to all creatures, whether on land or in the sea.

   b. Weiss explains the transition from an exclamatory statement to an indicative statement as follows: "Owing to the intermediate description, the excitement dissipates, and therefore the continuation of the summarizing verse (in v. 24) is not an exclamatory statement, but rather an indicative one." The truth, however, is that this transition follows from the contents of the two sections, and not necessarily from the interruption between them. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The *midrash* continues: "R. Shmuel bar Nachman said: I was riding on the shoulders of my grandfather… and I heard R. Shimon ben R. Elazar **expounding in the name of R. Meir**, 'And, behold it was very good' – 'And, behold, death is good.'" This implies that we are not dealing here with a variant reading that R. Meir had of the verse, but rather with a *derasha* that he proposed based on the similarity in sound between the words "*me'od*" and "*mavet*." [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The fact that the word "*eretz*" appears 7 times in our psalm turns it into a "guide word." Its importance stems from the fact that our psalm's perspective on creation relates primarily to the earth, from its original founding (v. 5) and until its future perfection (v. 35). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. According to this, the words "and renew the face of the earth" have special meaning: the very same earth that served previous creatures becomes renewed through the new creatures that God creates with it. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Everything stated here about "the good" of death and that it is a crucial component of creation is, of course, stated from the perspective of creation in its entirety and over the course of all the generations. From the perspective of the individual creature upon whom death is decreed, however, this is not true: "You hide Your face, they are terrified. You take away their breath, they die, and return to their dust" (v. 29). For the creature who is terrified when God conceals His face, there is no consolation in the knowledge that other creatures will be created from his dust, for he clings to life and does not want to part from it. But it is the Creator's wisdom not to govern His world exclusively in accordance with the needs of individuals, but rather primarily in accordance with the needs of creation as a whole. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Surely this section is preceded by verse 24, which proclaims: "You have made them all in wisdom." [↑](#footnote-ref-6)