YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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# **SEFER Tehillim**

**by Rav Elchanan Samet**

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This week's shiurim are dedicated   
in memory of Mr. Harry Meisels, Elchanan ben R. Yitzchak, A"H,  
whose yahrzeit falls on the 26th of Adar.

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**Lecture 52: "You have made them all in wisdom"**

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

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

### 5. Section 8 (vv. 31-35) – the closing blessing – "May the Lord rejoice in his works"

(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.

The closing section of our psalm is a prayer that the psalmist offers to God. This is clear in verse 31, with which this section opens, and in verse 35, with which it closes. These two verses express various requests of the psalmist. But even the two middle verses are part of the same prayer. For what does the psalmist pray? Once again let us turn to Weiss:

This is the psalmist's prayer: "May the glory of the Lord be forever, may the Lord rejoice in His works." "The glory of the Lord" first reflects itself in the creation.[[1]](#footnote-1) Our verse refers to the embodiment of the essence of God in the creation; and so "the glory of God" is paralleled by "His works." **When the psalmist says: "May the glory of the Lord be forever," he expresses his hope: may the created world exist forever.** The meaning of this blessing becomes fully clarified by the parallel blessing: "May the Lord rejoice in His works." The second blessing expresses the cause, the first mover. The condition for fulfilling the request, "May the glory of the Lord be forever," is the fulfillment of the request, "May the Lord rejoice in His works." The perception that finds expression in our verse is the perception explicitly expressed in *Bereishit* 6:6-7, which says about God: "And it grieved Him at his heart. And the Lord said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth, both man, and beast, and creeping things, and the birds of the air; for I repent that I have made them."

The next verse (v. 32) describes two destructive natural phenomena: The "trembling of the earth" refers to an earthquake, and the "smoking of the hills" refers to the eruption of a volcano. Even these natural phenomena are caused by God. "He looks upon the earth, and it trembles" - it stands to reason that we are dealing here with a look of wrath; "He touches the hills, and they smoke" - here too it is reasonable to assume that we are dealing with a touch the purpose of which is to bring a calamity.

What is the relationship between this verse and the previous verse? It is a relationship of opposites: "May the Lord rejoice in His works," for if this is not the case, God in his anger can also destroy His world, for "He looks upon the earth, and it trembles."

Here Weiss asks:

Why does the psalmist suddenly see that God's face has changed? Why does it enter his mind that God looks upon the earth and it trembles? Surely, he had earlier mentioned: "He established the earth on its foundations, so that it should never collapse" (v. 5)! Why does the thought arise in his mind that "He touches the hills, and they smoke"? Surely, he had recently pondered in his heart that God "waters the mountains from His upper chambers" (v. 13)?

Was God's wrath already mentioned in our psalm? In fact, it was, with respect to the water that covered the earth:

At **Your rebuke** they fled.

At the sound of **Your thunder** they hastened away.

When we compared this verse to the description of the creation of the land in *Bereishit* 1 (section III, 2), we brought Weiss's question, which he repeats here as well. But here he raises it to in order to provide an answer:

There we asked about the meaning of this description, which differs from the description of the event in *Bereishit* 1… Now it becomes clear that in the psalmist's eyes, the gathering together of the water reveals not only God's absolute superiority, but also His unqualified wrath against those who oppose and interfere with His plans for the world.[[2]](#footnote-2) And just as God's face darkened at the beginning when "He established the earth on its foundations, so that it should never collapse," and to be more precise, when "You covered it with great waters with a garment," so too this might happen in the future, when He looks upon the earth and it trembles. This perception gives rise to the request, "May the Lord rejoice in His works," and this perception reminds him that it is God who "looks upon the earth and it trembles."

But which creature is liable to anger God and cause Him to "look" upon the earth until it trembles? Who is it that endangers the continued existence of the created world?

Of all the world's creatures, there is none that can disturb this wonderful and amazing symphony called the creation except for man. Man, the only creature whose Creator does not testify about him, even according to the book of *Bereishit*, that he is “good,” and after ten generations it is stated about him that "the wickedness of man was great in the earth" (6:5) – man is the only creature who can turn this symphony into cacophony and bring it about that the Lord will not "rejoice in His works," but rather "look upon the earth, and it trembles… touch the hills, and they smoke."

Thus far, man has been presented in our psalm as another one of God's creatures, as a partner to cattle in the exploitation of the plants growing from the earth that is satisfied by the rain (vv. 14-15); as a partner to young lions in the division of the day into a period of his activity and a period of their activity (vv. 20-23); and as one who builds ships and traverses the sea in them, alongside the leviathan that plays in the water (v. 26).[[3]](#footnote-3) In all of these places, an allusion is made to man's superiority over the animals and the difference between his life and their lives, but this is because of man's intelligence. Essentially, however, man is thus far perceived as an integral part of creation, and not as one who stands before his Creator apart from the rest of creation.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Before the psalmist reveals who the person (or people) is who is liable to cause God to look upon the earth until it trembles, to touch the hills so that they smoke, he "presents the cure before the wound," describing what he himself will do in order to prevent this from happening:

I will sing to the Lord while I live.

I will sing praises to my God while I exist.

My meditation will be sweet to Him.

I will rejoice in the Lord. (vv. 33-34)

As long as he lives, he will sing to God, and he will hope that his "meditation" – his prayer, his song, and his praise – will be sweet to God, for he testifies about himself that "I will rejoice in the Lord," and his meditation is an expression of his joy in God.

There is a connection between the psalmist's hope at the beginning of the section, "May the Lord rejoice in His works," and his testimony about himself that "I will rejoice in the Lord." The person who rejoices in God and expresses his joy in his song and praise to God brings about that God too will rejoice in His works.

The psalmist concludes his prayer with another wish:

May the sinners be removed from the earth,

and may the wicked be no more.

Now it becomes clear who are liable to arouse God's wrath and cause Him to bring calamity upon the world: the sinners and the wicked. The removal of these people from the world guarantees that "May the glory of the Lord be forever, may the Lord rejoice in His works." Weiss discusses this verse:

Is not this verse grating dissonance following the sweet harmony that is played throughout the psalm, and especially between what precedes it and what follows it: "Bless the Lord, O my soul." Is it possible that the mouth that sounded a blessing now sounds a curse?[[5]](#footnote-5)

No dissonance is to be heard here, and even if there were dissonance, it would only be for the sake of the general harmony, so that the harmony be complete and perfect. Anyone whose heart is not filled with this dissonant request cannot be wholeheartedly interested in absolute harmony. Only one who says: "May the sinners be removed from the earth, and may the wicked be no more," can say: "May the glory of the Lord be forever." But "May the sinners be removed from the earth, and may the wicked be no more" can only be said by one who from the outset accepts upon himself to sing to God, and before all else turns to himself, to that which is unique in him, and says: “Bless the Lord, O my soul. ***Halleluyah***."

Our psalm concludes with that with which it opened – the call to himself, "Bless the Lord, O my soul," thus creating a clear framework for the psalm. But at the end of the psalm, these words are followed by yet another word, which is actually two words: "*Hallelu-Yah*," "praise the Lord." This call, which will appear many more times in the book of *Tehillim*, appears for the first time in the book at the end of our psalm. R. Yehuda the son of R. Shimon ben Pazi noted this and expounded (*Berakhot* 9b): "David composed a hundred and three chapters [of psalms], and he did not say *'Halleluyah'* until he saw the downfall of the wicked. As it says: 'May the sinners be removed from the earth, and may the wicked be no more. Bless the Lord, O my soul. *Halleluyah*.'"

### 6. THe difference between the first and Second halves of the psalm

At the beginning of section IV, which begins the second half of the psalm, we asked whether it is possible to find a fundamental common denominator running through all the sections of this half. We delayed discussing this question until now, after we dealt with each section by itself.

We originally divided the second half into five sections (sections 5-9). In the course of our analysis, however, it became clear that the second half comprises only three sections: verse 24 belongs to section 8, the latter being its direct continuation, and verses 25-26, which deal with the sea (and are marked as section 7), constitute a parenthetical remark and are not integrally connected to the themes discussed in the second half of the psalm.[[6]](#footnote-6) Let us record the three themes discussed in the second half:

1. (19-23) God's separation between day and night and its importance for the animals and man.
2. (24, 27-30) The created beings' dependence upon God, who provides them with their food or withholds it from them and returns them to their dust.
3. (31-35) A prayer for the preservation of the world forever based on God's joy in His works.

What is the common denominator between these three themes? At the beginning of subsection 1, we cited Weiss's comments regarding section 5, which opens the second half of the psalm. Weiss distinguishes between the themes discussed in the previous sections and the theme of section 5: "God's blessed wisdom regarding the foundation of space reveals itself in the boundaries set between land and water (sections 2-4), and His wisdom regarding the arrangement of time reveals itself in the boundaries set between light and darkness (section 5)."

We wish to expand upon Weiss's remarks and argue that the distinction between the two halves of the psalm is precisely this. The theme of the **entire** first half is God's greatness and wisdom as they reveal themselves in the foundation and inner organization of space, whereas the theme of the **entire** second half is God's wisdom and greatness as they reveal themselves in the distinctions between the various dimensions of time in which the world exists.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Various dimensions of time, ruled and arranged by the Creator, are described in the second half of the psalm:

Unit 1: The time discussed in this unit is the "objective" time that was established in the primal creation, and that all created beings experience together and at all times: the time of day and the time of night.

Unit 2: This unit discusses the personal time of each and every creature: its time to fill up on the food provided by God and live, and a time to die and return to its dust. "A time to be born and a time to die."[[8]](#footnote-8)

There is a striking inner connection between the first and second units. Verse 21 in the first unit, "The young lions roar for their prey, and seek food from God," alludes in advance to the theme of the second unit, "All of them wait upon You, to give them their food in its season." (v. 27).

Unit 3: In this unit, there is a discussion (by allusion) of the dimension of time in which the existence of the world continues – "forever." While it is true that God "established the earth on its foundations, **so that it should never collapse**" (v. 5), nevertheless the nature of the everlasting preservation of creation is conditioned on the deeds of man. Through his actions, man determines whether "the Lord will rejoice in His works" or whether, God forbid, "He will look upon the earth, and it will tremble; He will touch the hills, and they will smoke." The perfection of human society in such a way that "the sinners will be removed from the earth" will bring about that "the glory of the Lord" that finds expression in the world that He created will be "forever" and "the Lord will rejoice in His works."

It turns out, then, that the second half of the psalm deals with three distinctions that God makes in the dimension of time and by which the world is run: the distinction in cosmic time, upon which the activity of the world's creatures depends; the distinction in the time set for every creature upon which its life and death depends; and the **moral** distinction between the time that "the Lord rejoices in His works" and the time of His anger with the world, which is a consequence of human action.

Now let us ask whether there is a conceptual or structural parallel between the two halves of the psalm. It is unreasonable to expect that there should be precise parallels, because the nature of the arrangements in space, discussed in the first half, is very different from the nature of the arrangements in time, discussed in the second. Regarding the dimension of space, the discussion relates almost exclusively to a single topic, the separation and reconnection between water and land. Regarding the dimension of time, on the other hand, the discussion relates to various distinctions in diverse areas.[[9]](#footnote-9)

We can, however, point to a principle that runs through most of the sections in both halves of the psalm: God's wisdom reveals itself in the world that He created in the distinctions that He makes between things that must be distinct so that the world may exist, but also in the connections that God creates between these separate things, which are also necessary so that the world may continue to exist.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The literary framework in which the psalm is found – the call, "Bless the Lord, O my soul," at the beginning and at the end – may allude to a weak chiastic parallelism between the two halves. And indeed, between the psalm's opening section (vv. 1-4) and its closing section (vv. 31-35), there is a certain general similarity. In both of these sections, the psalmist offers a prayer and blesses God not in the framework of a description of what is happening in the world. In the opening section, he praises God as king, for once God created His world, He could be called king. In the closing section, he prays that the created world which he had described at length over the course of the psalm should continue to exist forever and thus give expression to God's glory.

As for the body of the two halves, we have already said that the parallelism between them lies in the fact that they describe God's wisdom as it is revealed in the world that He created, in the separation between its fundamental elements and in the connection between them - in the first half, the establishment and organization of space, and in the second half, the ordering of time.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. For example, "The heavens declare the glory of God" (*Tehillim* 19:2). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The water that covers the earth is perceived in our psalm, as in other places, as an opponent of God's plan to create the land, and therefore after God rebukes the water and causes it to flee "to the place that You prepared for them," He also sets a boundary for it "that they could not pass over, that they would not return to cover the earth." [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. We pointed this out in our discussion of each of these passages. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. On the contrary - the young lions roar for their prey, and seek food from God, whereas man acquires his food in a "secular" way: " Man goes forth to his work, and to his labor until evening" (vv. 21-23). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Here Weis discusses an *aggada* in *Berakhot* 10a in which Beruria, the wife of R. Meir, explains our verse:

   Beruria's explanation of our verse is well known: "Is it written: '[May] the sinners [*chot'im*] [be removed]'? It is written: '[May] the sins [*chata'im*] [be removed].' And furthermore, look at the end of the verse: "And may the wicked be no more." Since the sins will be removed, there will be no more wicked men! Rather pray for them that they should repent, and there will be no more wicked men." This explanation certainly does not accord with the plain sense of the verse. The word "*chata'im*" as it is vocalized is not the plural of "*chet*" (sin), but rather of "*chata*" (sinner). And the correctness of the traditional vocalization can be proven if we take Beruria's advice and look at the end of the verse: "And may the wicked be no more." These two clauses are synonymous with each other, and the word "*chata'im*" is synonymous with "*resha'im*."

   Nevertheless, an analysis of what is stated in our verse in comparison to other verses dealing with the removal of the wicked leads Weiss to a conclusion that is not very far from Beruria's *midrash*:

   An examination of the wording of the verse shows that it is not a curse. The psalmist does not use active clauses in which the subject is God, but rather passive clauses in which the subject is the sinners and the wicked, and the predicate is not a verb that denotes punishment, e.g., the verb *k-r-t*, as in "But the wicked shall be cut off (*yikaretu*) from the earth" (*Mishlei* 2:22), or the verb *a-b-d*, as in "And they perished (*va-yovdu*) from among the congregation" (*Bamidbar* 7:33). The predicates "be removed" and "be no more" are not expressions of punishment. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The need for this parenthetical statement and the reason for its location in this place were discussed above in sub-section 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. As may be recalled, Weiss did not divide our psalm into two halves, and therefore did not seek what we are seeking: an essential distinction between the two halves. Weiss contented himself with a distinction between sections 2-4 and section 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This distinction between the time designated for the life of each created being and the time designated for its death is not explicitly found in the creation story in *Bereishit* 1. R. Meir, however, saw it as a vital completion appearing at the end of the creation account: "And God saw everything that He had made, and, behold, it was very good ('*tov me'od*')" – "death is good" ('*tov mavet'*). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The common denominator of the three themes discussed in the second half is existence as opposed to non-existence. In the opening section, this is alluded to in verse 21; this allusion is greatly expanded in the main section, regarding which it is the manifest topic, and in it is alluded to in the concluding section in the psalmist's words: "I will sing to the Lord **while I live**. I will sing praises to my God **while I exist**" (v. 33, and perhaps also in v. 35: "May the sinners be removed from the earth". [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. "Differentiation does not imply absolute separation." We dealt with this matter at length in section III, in our discussion of the first half, and briefly in section IV, sub-section 1 and sub-section 4 (end). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)