YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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# **SEFER Tehillim**

**by Rav Elchanan Samet**

**Lecture 54: Psalm 107 - "Give thanks to the Lord, for He is Good, for His loving-kindness is forever"**

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| 1 | Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good, | for his loving-kindness is forever. |
| 2 | Let the redeemed of the Lord say this, | whom He redeemed from the hand of distress. |
| 3 | And whom He has gathered from the lands, | from the east, and from the west, from the north, and from the sea. |
| I | | |
| 4 | They lost themselves in the wilderness, their way in the desert. | They did not find a city of habitation. |
| 5 | Hungry and thirsty, | their spirit fainted within them. |
| 6 | **Then they cried to the Lord in their distress,** | **and He delivered them from their troubles.** |
| 7 | And He led them on the straight path, | to go to a city of habitation. |
| 8 | *Let them thank the Lord for His loving-kindness,* | *and for His wondrous works to the children of man.* |
| 9 | That He has satisfied the thirsty soul, | and He has filled the hungry soul with good. |
| II | | |
| 10 | Those who sat in darkness and the shadow of death, | bound in affliction and iron, |
| 11 | Because they had rebelled against the words of God, | and derided the counsel of the Most High. |
| 12 | So He brought down their heart with afflictions, | they fell down and there was none to help. |
| 13 | **They cried to the Lord in their distress,** | **and he saved them from their troubles.** |
| 14 | He brought them out from darkness and the shadow of death, | and he broke their bonds asunder. |
| 15 | *Let them thank the Lord for His loving-kindness,* | *and for His wondrous works to the children of man.* |
| 16 | That He has broken the gates of brass, | and He has cut the bars of iron asunder. |
| III | | |
| 17 | The foolish who can be recognized by their way of sin, | and who are afflicted on account of their iniquities. |
| 18 | Whose soul abhors all food, | and who have come near the gates of death. |
| 19 | **Then they cried to the Lord in their distress,** | **and He saved them from their troubles.** |
| 20 | He sent His word and healed them, | and He rescued them from their destruction. |
| 21 | *Let them thank the Lord for His loving-kindness,* | *and for His wondrous works to the children of man.* |
| 22 | And let them sacrifice sacrifices of thanksgiving, | and let them declare His works with rejoicing. |
| IV | | |
| 23 | Those who go down to the sea in ships, | who do work in great waters. |
| 24 | They have seen the works of the Lord, | and His wonders in the deep. |
| 25 | For He commanded and raised a stormy wind, | and it lifted up its waves. |
| 26 | They rose up to the sky, they went down to the depths, | their soul trembled because of the trouble. |
| 27 | They reeled and staggered like a drunkard, | and all their skill disappeared. |
| 28 | **Then they cried to the Lord in their distress,** | **and He brought them out from their troubles.** |
| 29 | He made the storm a calm, | and their waves became still. |
| 30 | And they were glad because they became quiet, | and He guided them to their desired harbor. |
| 31 | *Let them thank the Lord for His loving-kindness,* | *and for His wondrous works to the children of man.* |
| 32 | And let them exalt Him in the congregation of the people, | and let them praise Him in the assembly of the elders. |
| V | | |
| 33 | He turned rivers into wilderness, | and springs of water into dry ground, |
| 34 | A fruitful land into desolation, | Because of the wickedness of those who dwelled therein. |
| 35 | He turned wilderness into a pool of water, | and dry ground into springs of water. |
| 36 | And He settled the hungry there, | and they established a city of habitation. |
| 37 | And they sowed fields and planted vineyards, | and they yielded fruits of increase. |
| 38 | And He blessed them, and they multiplied greatly, | and He did not diminish their cattle. |
| VI | | |
| 39 | But they were diminished and brought low | by the dominion of evil and sorrow. |
| 40 | He pours contempt upon nobles, | and He makes them wander in the wilderness where there is no way. |
| 41 | But He has set the needy on high from poverty, | and He has made their families like a flock. |
|  | | |
| 42 | The upright see this and rejoice, | and all the iniquity shuts its mouth. |
| 43 | Whoever is wise must keep these things, | and let them contemplate the acts of the loving-kindness of the Lord. |

### THe structure of the psalm and an overview of its themes

Psalm 107 is not a psalm of thanksgiving in the usual sense of the term. It is not an expression of gratitude to God on the part of an individual speaking in the first person and recounting what had happened to him and how he feels about it. Nevertheless, it is appropriate to include our psalm among the psalms of thanksgiving in the book of *Tehillim*, and perhaps even to place it at the top of the list, because it spells out the "theory of thanksgiving" - in what situations is one obligated to offer thanksgiving, and how does one fulfill this duty?[[1]](#footnote-1)

In this section, we will review the various parts of the psalm as we presented them at the beginning of our study. We will try to understand its basic structure without addressing all the exegetical questions regarding the psalm's details, or even those regarding the psalm as a whole.

The psalm opens with three verses that comprise a heading for the entire psalm: "Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good." These are the words that will be said by the "redeemed of the Lord" when He redeems them from the hand of distress, and gathers them from the lands of their dispersion.

We then come to four stanzas with a fixed structure that seem to spell out in detail what was stated in general terms in the opening verses. Each stanza offers an example of "the redeemed" whom God delivered from some distress and who thank Him for the loving-kindness that He performed for them.

* Stanza 1 (vv. 4-9) describes those who lost their way in the desert, and were hungry and thirsty, and God led them "on the straight path, to go to a city of habitation."
* Stanza 2 (vv. 10-16) describes those who were imprisoned in darkness and the shadow of death, and God took them out from their captivity and broke their bonds asunder.
* Stanza 3 (vv. 17-22) describes those who were ill and abhorred all food, coming near the gates of death, and God healed them from their illness and rescued them.
* Stanza 4 (vv. 23-32) describes those who went out to sea and a storm threatened their ship, placing them in great danger, and God silenced the storm and led them to their desired harbor.

As stated above, these four stanzas have a uniform structure - each stanza is built of four parts appearing in a fixed order:

1. The first part of each stanza describes the distress. Of course, in this part, each stanza distinguishes itself from the others, as is dictated by the differences between the various troubles.
2. The second part of each stanza describes how those in distress cry out to God and how God answers those cries. This part repeats itself almost word for word in each of the four stanzas with only slight variation in the verbs.[[2]](#footnote-2)
3. The third part of each stanza describes in practical terms how God answers the cries of those in distress, how He saves them from their troubles. Here too, the various stanzas differ one from the other, in continuation of the differences between them in the first part.
4. The fourth part in each stanza describes the gratitude offered to God by those who were rescued.[[3]](#footnote-3) This part is comprised of two verses in each stanza. The first verse is identical in all four stanzas: "Let them thank the Lord for His loving-kindness and for His wondrous works to the children of man."[[4]](#footnote-4) The second verse constitutes an addition to the previous verse, and it is different in each stanza. In stanzas 1-2, the additional verse contains an explanation of the gratitude, and therefore opens with the word "*ki*" (because). Of course, the explanation in each stanza is different in accordance with the distress and rescue described in each.[[5]](#footnote-5) In stanzas 3-4, the addition constitutes an expansion of the description of the gratitude - how the gratitude expresses itself in practice. In stanza 3, those coming to thank God offer sacrifices of thanksgiving and declare (apparently to their partners in the offering) His works while rejoicing; in stanza 4, they exalt Him in the congregation of the people and in the assembly of the elders.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Following these four stanzas, which tell of individuals who encountered various kinds of trouble and were saved, stanzas 5 and 6 expand the discussion to lands and nations. Just as God brings troubles and dangers to individuals as punishment for their sins (this is explicitly stated in stanza 2 and alluded to in stanzas 3-4[[7]](#footnote-7)), and when the circumstances change He saves them from their distress, so too regarding nations and their lands.

Stanza 5 (vv. 33-38) begins, in vv. 33-34, with an account of the punishment that God brings to the land; God turns a flowering land into wilderness "because of the wickedness of those who dwelled therein." Even though this is not stated explicitly, it is clear that the inhabitants of this land, because of whose wickedness the land was turned into wilderness, could no longer live there and were forced into exile. The continuation of this stanza (vv. 35-38) describes a reversal of the state of this land and a return to its former condition, at which time its inhabitants return to it[[8]](#footnote-8) and settle it anew, and this resettlement succeeds.

Stanza 6 (vv. 39-41) describes a process parallel to that found in stanza 5, but this time the process is described directly in relationship to the nation. Stanzas 5 and 6 do not appear to be dealing with different events, but rather with two aspects of the same event – the punishment that befalls a nation and its land as a result of the nation's sins – only that stanza 5 expresses the punishment in terms of a change in the nature of the land, whereas stanza 6 the punishment relates directly to the people.[[9]](#footnote-9) "But they were diminished and brought low by the dominion of evil and sorrow. He pours contempt upon nobles, and He makes them wander in the wilderness where there is no way." In this stanza as well God saves the nation and restores it to its previous state (v. 41): "But He has set the needy on high from poverty, and He has made their families like a flock." This verse substantively parallels the closing verse of stanza 5, which says of the "hungry" who resettled in their land (v. 38): "And He blessed them, and they multiplied greatly, and He did not diminish their cattle."

A comparison between stanzas 5-6 and stanzas 1-4 reveals the absence of two critical stages in stanzas 5-6: First of all, between the stage of the punishment and the stage of the redemption, there is no expression of any prayer to God on the part of those in distress, similar to the recurring verse in stanzas 1-4: "They cried to the Lord in their distress." This absence does not constitute a great difficulty: in the case of nations and lands, several generations may pass between the stage of punishment and the stage of redemption. Thus, there is no room here for the description of a prayer that is immediately answered, as we find in stanzas 1-4, which deal with the fate of individuals.

More serious, however, is the fact that stanzas 5-6 lack the stage of thanksgiving that is supposed to follow the account of the redemption. Surely, this is the main theme of the entire psalm from beginning to end, and clearly a nation that has been redeemed and returned to its homeland must offer thanks to God!

This deficiency seems to be filled in by what is stated in the psalm's introductory verses (vv. 1-3) and in its conclusion (vv. 42-43). Earlier, we defined verses 1-3 as a heading to the psalm, as a general statement that is spelled out in detail in the four stanzas that follow. The truth, however, is that the impression given by these verses after reading stanzas 5-6 is different. "The redeemed of the Lord whom He redeemed from the hand of distress" refers to the **nation** whose fate is described in stanzas 5-6, the nation that was exiled from its land after it was turned into wilderness and desolation. This nation lived among its enemies, and when "the Lord redeemed them from the hand of distress," He "gathered them from the lands" of their dispersion back to their own land. And it is precisely about these redeemed of the Lord that it is says that they will say: "Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good, for his loving-kindness is forever." This is brought as a direct quote from their mouths, a quote that appears at the very beginning of the psalm!

Stanzas 5-6 provide a two-sided completion of the introductory verses 1-3. On the one hand, they provide a retrospective completion that clarifies how and why those redeemed of the Lord found themselves in the hand of distress, to the point that in order to redeem them, God had to gather them from the four corners of the earth. Because of their wickedness while they resided in their own land, they were punished, their land turned into desolation, and they were reduced in numbers to the point that they fell into the hand of distress in enemy lands.

On the other hand, stanzas 5-6 complete the account of the gathering of the exiles into their land. Not only did God redeem them and restore them to their land, but He also restored the land to its previous state and resettled the hungry exiles within it. After they were returned to their land, the exiles enjoyed huge success and God multiplied them greatly.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The last two verses (vv. 42-43) serve as a conclusion that contains a twofold didactic conclusion from what is stated in the psalm as a whole.[[11]](#footnote-11) The first conclusion is formulated in verse 42:

The upright see this and rejoice,

and all the iniquity shuts its mouth.

The entire psalm leads to the conclusion that God governs His creatures, both as individuals and as nations, with justice and righteousness. Punishment falls upon individuals and upon nations because of their sins,[[12]](#footnote-12) and they both merit redemption in the wake of their repentance before God and their crying out before Him in their distress.

This contemplation regarding the ways of God's governance brings the "upright" to see and rejoice, and the "iniquity" – the people who conduct themselves in wrongful manner – to shut their mouths, an expression of the blocking of their words and arguments.

The second conclusion from what is stated in the psalm as a whole is formulated in verse 43:

Whoever is wise must keep these things,

and let them contemplate the acts of the loving-kindness of the Lord.

In this context, the words "keeping these things" means putting to heart that which was stated in the entire psalm. Contemplation of the "loving-kindness of God" is, of course, intended to bring us to thanking God for His loving-kindness, as is stated in the meta-motif of the psalm: "Let them thank the Lord for His loving-kindness, and for His wondrous works to the children of man."

Even though these concluding verses relate, as stated above, to the entire psalm, they are most strongly connected to stanzas 5-6, which immediately precede them, the two stanzas which deal with the fate of a people (and their land), rather than the fate of individuals.

The common denominator of these two concluding verses is the need for "seeing" ("the upright see this") and "contemplation" ("and let them contemplate"). Such seeing and contemplation are needed primarily with respect to a broad historical process that spreads out over many generations, as is described in stanzas 5-6. Short-term changes in the life of an individual, such as those described in stanzas 1-4, require less contemplation and inspection in order to reveal in them the hand of God and His loving-kindness.[[13]](#footnote-13)

1. The scope of individual and collective psalms of thanksgiving in the book of *Tehillim* was discussed in our study of psalm 30, section II, and notes 14 and 15 there. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The verb used for man's turning to God is "*vayitz'aku*" in stanzas 1 and 4, and "*vayiz'aku*" in stanzas 2 and 3. The verb used for God's answering those who turned to Him is "*yoshi'em*" in stanzas 2 and 3; "*yatzilem*" in stanza 1; and "*yotzi'em*" in stanza 4.

   There is no need to offer an explanation for these differences, for there is no significant difference between the parallel words. The purpose of the differences is to create variation in the stereotypic repetition. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. These four parts are the four components that characterize psalms of thanksgiving in general, as was discussed in our study of psalm 30, section II. Usually, however, the order of the components in psalms of thanksgiving is not chronological order, for the starting point in such psalms is the thanksgiving for the rescue – the fourth component. Our psalm, on the other hand, is not a psalm of thanksgiving in the usual sense (see the beginning of this section), but rather a psalm that **speaks about** the situations in which one must give thanks to God. The four components therefore appear in their chronological order as the four parts of each stanza. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Owing to its great importance in the psalm, this verse repeats itself stereotypically without any variation. This verse contains the central motif of the entire psalm – giving thanks to God. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. It is possible that the role of these verses is not to serve as reasons for giving thanks, but rather to express the content of the thanksgiving by way of an indirect quote. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The expansion in stanza 3 is not unique to it; it is appropriate for all four stanzas, as is the expansion in stanza 4. The expansions in stanzas 1-2 would also be fitting (in the appropriate formulation) to stanzas 3-4. It turns out, then, that the differences between the four stanzas in this part are meant to create a complementary relationship between them. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Stanza 2 describes the suffering of the prisoners as resulting from the fact that they "had rebelled against the words of God and derided the counsel of the Most High" (v. 11), and states that it was God who "brought down their heart with afflictions" (v. 12). Stanza 3 describes the sick as "the foolish who can be recognized by their way of sin, and who are afflicted on account of their iniquities" (v. 17), but there it is not explicitly stated that it was God who brought their illness upon them. The opposite is true regarding stanza 4. There, it says that it was God who brought the storm upon those who went out to sea (vv. 24-25), but it does not say there that they had sinned. It seems that regarding this point as well (as we said in note 6) the differences between the four stanzas are intended to create a complementary relationship between them. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Nowhere is it explicitly stated that the "hungry" whom God settled in the land that was redeemed from its desolation are the same people as those who had lived there when the land had turned into wilderness. This, however, stands to reason from the very designation of the settlers as "the hungry" – their hunger was a consequence of that land having become a desolate wilderness. Moreover, the theme of this psalm is the changes in the fate of people, and the changes that befell the land are discussed only for the sake of the changes that befell the people who lived on that land. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. A twofold account of the punishment and the deliverance from these two perspectives is found in *Yechezkel* 36. Until verse 16, we find an account of the wretched state of the land and a promise regarding the land's redemption (which, of course, is also relevant to the nation that had been exiled from it). From verse 16 until verse 32, we find a description of the same things with respect to the nation. In verses 33-38, the two processes of the redemption of the nation and of the land are joined together. It should be noted that various substantive and linguistic connections link this chapter in *Yechezkel* to stanzas 1-4 in our psalm. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. It turns out that if we join the introductory verses to stanzas 5-6 and relate to stanzas 1-4 as placed in parentheses, we would find a psalm of thanksgiving that is typical of many of the thanksgiving psalms in the book of *Tehillim*. It opens with an expression of gratitude that follows the deliverance, and only afterwards does it reconstruct the original trouble and go into a detailed account of the rescue. This is not the way that stanzas 1-4 are structured; see our comments above, note 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. That the conclusion of a psalm sometimes contains a didactic conclusion from what is stated in the psalm as a whole was noted in our study of psalm 27, section I, in our discussion of verse 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See note 7, and add verse 34 to the verses mentioned there. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The contrast between "the upright" and "the iniquity" in verse 42 also alludes to the fact that we are not dealing with individuals. "The iniquity" refers to "global forces of wrongdoing," rather than to wicked individuals. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)