YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**YHE-HOLIDAY: SPECIAL ROSH HASHANA 5777 SHIUR**

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**In memory of Batya Furst z"l
Niftera 28 Elul 5765.
Dedicated by her family.**

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 **“*Le-David Hashem Ori Ve-Yish’i*”**

**By Rav Amnon Bazak**

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. **Introduction**

*Mizmor* 27 of *Tehillim*, which we recite from Rosh Chodesh Elul until Hoshana Rabba or Shemini Atzeret, has been the subject of much attention by commentators on *Sefer Tehillim* throughout the ages. The reason that this chapter is read during Elul is the famous teaching that connects its opening words to the Days of Judgment. The *Shulchan Arukh* (128:2) records this custom as follows:

It is also customary in our region that from the second day of Rosh Chodesh Elul until Shemini Atzeret, following the morning and evening prayer services we recite the psalm, “*Le-David Hashem Ori Ve-Yish’i.”* This is based on the *midrash*: “‘The Lord is my light’ – on Rosh Ha-Shana, ‘and my salvation’ – on Yom Kippur; ‘For He will hide me in His shelter (*be-sukko*)’ – this alludes to Sukkot.”

Most commentaries on this chapter have focused on the central problem of the relationship between its beginning and its end. The psalmist begins by expressing absolute faith and trust:

The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear? The Lord is my life’s strength, whom shall I dread? ... Though an army would besiege me, my heart would not fear! ...

In the latter part of the chapter, in contrast, the psalmist seems to be seized with fear and doubt:

Do not hide Your face from me… Do not abandon me; do not forsake me… Do not deliver me to the wishes of my tormentors….

What has happened to the great trust that was expressed at the outset?

R. Feivel Meltzer explains:

The great question that arises… is whether this is a single chapter, or whether the text as we have it actually includes two chapters which, over time, came to be joined together…[[1]](#footnote-1)

Indeed, it must be acknowledged that in this instance the arguments of those who view this chapter as comprised of separate parts is stronger than usual, since we find here first an expression of faith and afterwards a supplication for salvation. First the calm, and then the storm; first the praise, and afterwards the prayer. It must be acknowledged that it is usually easier for us to understand a prayer that moves towards praise and thanksgiving, a tempest that dies down to quiet, than one that moves in the opposite direction.

Nevertheless, R. Meltzer concludes:

It seems that we might understand this order, too. It is possible that the psalmist-worshipper might start off by expressing faith and trust, and only afterwards set forth all his supplications. It is not only with regard to matters of logic that it is written, “There is no order to the Mishna” and “there is no chronological order.” With regard to the expression of emotions, the outpouring of the heart, we also need not demand logical progression.[[2]](#footnote-2)

1. **Three Parts**

The truth is that the chapter would seem to be divided not into two parts, but rather into three: vv. 1-3; 4-6; and 7-14.

**Part I: Trust**

1. Of David: The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is my life’s strength; whom shall I dread?
2. When evildoers approach me to devour my flesh, my tormentors and my foes against me – it is they who stumble and fall.
3. Though an army would besiege me, my heart would not fear; though war would arise against me, in this I trust.

In this first part, the psalmist expresses complete trust and confidence, with no fear at all. The description in these verses is reminiscent of Chapter 23, which opens with the declaration, “The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not lack,” and goes on to express absolute trust in God. The two chapters also share linguistic links. In Chapter 23 we read, “Though I walk in the valley of death I shall fear no evil, for You are with me,” while our chapter declares, “Though an army would besiege me, my heart would not fear.”

Chapter 23 concludes with a declaration of trust that this state of grace – a situation of God’s complete protection – will continue forever: “May only goodness and kindness pursue me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the House of the Lord for long days.” Clearly, such a situation is not practically possible. The psalm expresses the sort of feeling that a person may have at special moments in his life, when he has a strong sense of God’s closeness and of His complete protection. However, no one ever merits to experience this on a permanent, ongoing basis; King David’s aspiration to “dwell in the House of the Lord for long days” has yet to be attained. Psalm 23 and the opening verses of psalm 27 express a feeling that is fundamentally suited to singular, occasional moments. The greatness of this feeling is the recognition that a person’s confidence and stability flow from his great faith in God, that wondrous feeling that “I shall fear no evil, for You are with me.”

**Part II: Concern and creeping doubt**

1. One thing I ask of the Lord; that is what I shall seek: That I dwell in the House of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the sweetness of the Lord and to contemplate in His Sanctuary.
2. For He will hide me in His shelter on the day of evil; He will conceal me in the concealment of His Tent; He will lift me upon a rock.
3. Now my head is raised above my enemies around me, and I will slaughter offerings in His Tent, accompanied by joyous song; I will sing and make music to the Lord.

The second part of the psalm starts where Psalm 23 leaves off. Even when a person is at the very peak of his joy, the nature of the world is such that after a time he will begin to feel a gnawing doubt. How long will this happiness last? At this he launches into prayer, beseeching God that he will be able to continue basking in God’s House and in His glory. In chapter 27, the psalmist lacks confidence that he will “dwell in the House of the Lord for long days.” He begs and prays, “One thing I ask of the Lord; that is what I shall seek: That I dwell in the House of the Lord all the days of my life….”

When a person moves from trust to supplication, he starts to worry about future troubles, and prays: “For He will hide me in His shelter on the day of evil; He will conceal me in the concealment of His Tent; He will lift me upon a rock.” His trust is undermined, and the hope and expectation of dwelling in God’s House for long days no longer seems so certain.

**Part III: Time of trouble**

1. O Lord, hear my voice when I call; be gracious toward me and answer me.
2. In your behalf my heart has said, “Seek My Presence.” Your Presence, O Lord, do I seek.
3. Do not hide Your face from me; do not repel Your servant in anger. You have been my Helper; do not abandon me, do not forsake me, O God of my salvation.
4. For my father and mother have forsaken me; the Lord will gather me in.
5. Teach me Your way, Lord, and lead me on the path of integrity, because of my watchful foes.
6. Do not deliver me to the wishes of my tormentors, for false witnesses have arisen against me, who breathe violence.
7. Had I not trusted that I would see the goodness of the Lord in the land of life…
8. Hope to the Lord, strengthen yourself and He will give you courage, and hope to the Lord.

In these verses, the psalmist finds himself beset by the crisis that he feared in the second part of the psalm. He stands facing his tormentors, the false witnesses who “breathe violence,” and feels alone and forsaken: “For my father and mother have forsaken me…” He begs God to continue protecting him: “Do not abandon me; do not forsake me… Do not deliver me to the wishes of my tormentors…” Towards the end of the psalm, there is a sense of standing on the brink of catastrophe: “Had I not trusted that I would see the goodness of the Lord in the land of life…” The psalmist dares not even complete the sentence and describe what his situation would be had he not trusted in God and hoped to see His goodness.

1. **Hope to the Lord**

We might therefore summarize our discussion by saying that Psalm 27 describes three different moods that a person might experience. There are periods of joy and complete trust; there are periods in which he is afraid and his trust in the continuation of the happy situation begins to wane; and there are periods of difficulty and crisis, when a person finds himself alone facing his enemies. The beauty of this psalm lies in its integration of these three periods and the faith in God that is interwoven throughout. Always, at all times, a person comes back to expressing his faith in God. At joyous times, he recognizes that it is God Who is behind his happy situation. When beset with doubts, he addresses God in prayer and supplication. In times of trouble, he maintains his faith that God will yet show him His goodness in the land of life.

A person’s mood likewise goes through different stages over the course of the *Yamim Nora’im*. These are days of judgment, when we sound the *shofar*, recalling the verse, “Shall a shofar be sounded in the city and the people not tremble?!” (*Amos* 3:6) Every person is fearful and filled with dread with the approach of the holy day, when all of mankind passes before God like a flock of sheep and He decrees their fate – who for life, and who for death. It is no wonder that the mere name of the month – Elul – causes one’s insides to contract in fear of the Judge of all the earth.

On the other hand, we are certain that the judgment will be good. Along with our fear and supplication – “Do not hide Your face from me” – we have a sense that “the Lord is my life’s strength; whom shall I dread?”

And so we find in the *midrash* (*Vayikra Rabba* 21:4):

“My light” – on Rosh Ha-Shana; “and my salvation” – on Yom Kippur…

“When evildoers approach me” – these are the representatives of the nations of the world;

“to devour my flesh” – because the representatives of the nations of the world come to prosecute Israel before God…

Israel say to God: “Though an army” – of Samael – “would besiege me, my heart would not fear…”

The three periods or situations described in the psalm, reflected in three moods, coalesce into a single message, which is uniquely appropriate to the days of judgment and *selichot*. It is with this message that the psalmist concludes:

Hope to the Lord; strengthen yourself and HE will give you courage, and hope to the Lord.

1. The various opinions are reviewed by M. Weiss, *Emunot Ve-De’ot Be-Mizmorei Tehillim* (Jerusalem, 5761), p. 16ff. His conclusion is that “a proper review of the psalm in its entirety shows it to be a single literary creation, and not a composite, for its parts are organically related to one another” (p. 70). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. R. Feivel Meltzer, *Penei Sefer Tehillim* (Jerusalem, 5743), p. 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)