YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***TEHILLIM*(SERIES II)**

**Rav Elchanan Samet**

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In memory of Rebbetzin Miriam Wise, Miriam bat Yitzhak veRivkah z”l,

whose yahrtzeit is on 9 Tevet.

By Rav Yitzchak and Stefanie Etshalom

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**Shiur #08: Psalm 117 - “O Praise The Lord, All You Nations”**

**The Shortest Psalm in the Book of Tehillim**

I 1 O Praise the Lord, all you nations;

Praise Him all you peoples.

II 2 For His love for us is great;

And the truth of the Lord endures forever.

Halleluya!

### I. A two-versed psalm?!

Psalm 117 is the shortest psalm in the book of *Tehillim.* It is two verses long, and is comprised of only 16 or 17 words.[[1]](#footnote-1) Is it possible for two short verses to constitute a separate psalm in the book of *Tehillim*?

The *Tosafot* have this to say about a different psalm: "It is impossible for the psalm to be [only] two verses" (*Pesachim* 117a, s.v. *she-omedim*).[[2]](#footnote-2) This comment implies that the *Tosafot* were not familiar with a two-versed psalm in the book of *Tehillim* and that they thought that the existence of such a psalm was impossible. It would seem, then, that the division of the psalms of *Hallel* in the Tosafists' version of *Tehillim* was different than ours.

Indeed, the Meiriin his commentary to our psalm writes that "in our books [Provence, 14th century]… these two verses [117:1-2] are the end of Psalm 'I love.'" In other words, they do not constitute a separate psalm, but rather conclude the previous psalm (116), which opens with the words "I love the Lord who hears."Ginsburg, in his edition of the Hebrew Bible writes that in most manuscripts and in three early printed editions of the Bible, Psalm 117 and Psalm 116 constitute a single *parasha*. Moreover, in most manuscripts, *Tehillim* 118:1 does not begin a new psalm; rather, the next psalm begins only in verse 5, with the words, "Out of my distress."

According to these accounts, Psalm 117 was not considered an independent psalm, but rather as the conclusion of the previous psalm, and according to other accounts, it was treated as a passage in the middle of a psalm, which began with the words, "I love the Lord who hears my voice" (*Tehillim* 116:1) and ended with the words, "Let those now who fear the Lord say that His steadfast loves endures forever" (118:4).

However, the two most important Masoretic manuscripts, Keter Aram Tzovaand MS Leningrad, and in their wake most of the printed editions of the Bible, view Psalm 117 as an independent psalm of two verses.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Does an examination of the texts of these two verses justify their status as a separate unit, separate and apart from what precedes and follows it? An examination of the content and style of the two verses does indeed confirm the fact that they comprise an independent unit.

The call of "Halleluya" serves in the book of *Tehillim*, in almost every instance, to close a psalm or to open it (and in several psalms it appears both at the beginning and at the end).[[4]](#footnote-4) The call "Halleluya" appears before the words, "O praise the Lord, all the nations" (that is, as the conclusion for our Psalm 116) and after the words, "and the truth of the Lord endures forever." It must be, then, that these two calls set apart the words between them, bestowing upon them the status of an independent psalm. As for these two calls themselves, according to our version of *Tehillim*, they both **conclude** the psalm in which they are found.

As for their style, the two verses under discussion are marked by a framework that establishes their borders: At the beginning, **"Praise (*hallelu*) the Lord,"** and at the end, **"Halleluya."**

As for their content, the two verses under discussion contain a whole idea, all of which is organized within a "praise framework" made up of its regular components: An appeal directed at those present to praise God (verse 1) and a rationale for this appeal that begins with the word "for" (*ki*) (verse 2). A framework of this kind is typical of many psalms of praise in our book,[[5]](#footnote-5) but here its components are short and compact. The content of these two verses is clearly distinguished from the content of the verses that precede them,[[6]](#footnote-6) and also from the style of the verses that follow them.[[7]](#footnote-7)

It may be that the argument advanced by the *Tosafot*, "It is impossible for the psalm to be [only] two verses," is not intended to deny as a matter of principle the possibility of a two-versed psalm. Perhaps it relates exclusively to the specific psalm under discussion there (i.e., *Tehillim* 135:1-2), and the *Tosafot* therefore use a definite pronoun, "the psalm." As opposed to our psalm, these verses are an "orphaned appeal" to "the servants of the Lord, who stand in the house of the Lord, in the courts of the house of our Lord," to praise the Lord. This appeal lacks a rationale, and it is not followed by any response on the part of the servants of the Lord. In none of the psalms of praise in the book of *Tehillim* do we find another case of a psalm of praise comprised exclusively of an appeal to praise God with no other component.

When analyzing a psalm we must remember that the artistic intensity of a poem does not depend upon its length. Even two verses can serve as the framework of an entire poem with a rich content. Additional examples of this are found in the book of *Tehillim*,[[8]](#footnote-8) as well as in the books of the Prophets[[9]](#footnote-9) and the Writings.[[10]](#footnote-10)

### II. the structure and explanation of the Psalm

Our short psalm is divided into two stanzas and into two equal halves, as we transcribed the psalm at the beginning of this study: Stanza I, with two lines, and eight words; stanza II, also with two lines, and seven words. At the end of the psalm, there is a conclusion, which also distinguishes the previous chapters of *Hallel* (113, 115, 116) – "Halleluya."

Let us explain each of the psalm's stanzas:

**Stanza I**

O praise the Lord, all you nations;

Praise Him all you peoples.

The two clauses comprising stanza I stand in complete, direct, synonymous parallelism. Two words stand out in the second clause, which, though their meaning is clear, are found primarily in later Biblical Hebrew or in Aramaic. The root *shin-bet-chet*, "praise," which seems so natural in a psalm, and especially in a psalm of praise (as it parallels the root *heh-lamed-lamed*), is found only rarely in the book of *Tehillim*, and only a few times in all of the Bible.[[11]](#footnote-11) On the other hand, the root is common in Aramaic and in Rabbinic Hebrew.[[12]](#footnote-12)

The noun *uma*, "people," appears only twice in Biblical Hebrew (*Bereishit* 25:16; *Bamidbar* 25:15), and it denotes a tribe or a large family. In the Aramaic sections of Scripture – *Daniel* and *Ezra* – it appears eight times, always in the sense of "nation." The masculine form of this noun, *um*, in the sense of "people" or "nation," is found only in our psalm.

It may be suggested then that the second clause of stanza I "translates" the first clause, which is formulated in "classical" Biblical language, into a linguistic dialect that is influenced by Aramaic. The parallelism is thus created by way of a transition from one linguistic layer to another.

**Stanza II**

For His love for us is great;

And the truth of the Lord endures forever.

At first glance, there is no parallelism or completion between the clauses that comprise stanza II, as the two clauses express to two separate ideas.

Here, for example, is the commentary of the Meiri on this verse, which illustrates the absence of any continuation between the two clauses of the verse:

For His love for us is great – taking us out from under their hands [the hands of the nations], and from under their oppression.

And the truth of the Lord – alludes to our Torah, which will stand forever.

The commentator means to say that both of these things will take place at the time of the Israel's redemption, but this does not suffice to create continuity or completion between the two clauses.

All this, however, is only at first glance. Upon closer examination, we find that between the two clauses there is synonymous parallelism between the most important word in the first clause – *chasdo*, "His love" – and the two most important words in the second clause – *emet Hashem*, "the truth of the Lord." *Chesed* and *emet* appear as a pair in tens of places in Scripture. In many places they appear together,[[13]](#footnote-13) and sometimes they appear in parallel clauses, as is the case in our psalm.[[14]](#footnote-14) In places where this pair of words appears, we get the impression that we are dealing with "two words that are one" – hendiadys – that is to say, a figure of speech in which two words connected by a conjunction are used to express a single notion: *chesed* which is *emet*[[15]](#footnote-15):

"The truth of the Lord" is then "the love of the Lord," the great good that He bestowed upon us because of the special relationship between us, because of the covenant that He made with us:

*Gavar aleinu chasdo*

*Ve-emet Hashem le-olam*

When God's "love" for us reveals itself, it reveals itself as a "love forever," an eternal love. The word *chesed*, in the sense of covenant or promise that has been realized, is connected many times in the Bible to the word *olam*, or similar words.[[16]](#footnote-16)This is not true about the word *emet* when found by itself, which is rarely connected to the word *olam*,[[17]](#footnote-17) unless it is used in the sense of *chesed*, as it is in our psalm.

It seems that we must complete the second clause based on the first clause:

*Gavar aleinu chasdo*

*Ve-emet HaShem* [*gavra aleinu*] *le-olam*

Thus we have a case of synonymous, defective, chiastic parallelism.

The two parallelisms in our psalm are both synonymous in terms of their content, but in terms of their form and style they are of opposite types: The first is direct and complete, whereas the second is defective and chiastic.

Here let us comment on a reversal that takes place between the two parallelisms with regard to the mention of God's name. In the first parallelism, God's name appears in the first clause: "O Praise **the Lord**," whereas in the second clause there is an allusion to God in the pronominal suffix in the parallel term *shabechu****hu***, "praise **Him**." It is just the opposite in the second parallelism: The first clause alludes to God with the pronominal suffix in the word *chas****do*,** "**His** love" (it can do this because it relies on the first parallelism), whereas in the second clause God's name is mentioned together with the word "truth" – "the truth of the Lord."

Stanza I O Praise **the Lord**

Praise **Him**

Stanza II **His** love

The truth of **the Lord**

We are left only to explain the verb that joins the subject of the sentence, "the love of the Lord" – *gavar aleinu chasdo* (and as stated, this verb must be filled in in the second clause: *ve-emet HaShem* [*gavra aleinu*].

The term *gavar* in Scripture generally means "overcome, defeat."[[18]](#footnote-18) This meaning would be inappropriate in our passage, for we, the recipients of God's love, do not oppose this love, but rather we desire it with all our hearts, and so it would be difficult to explain that the love must "overcome" or "defeat" us.[[19]](#footnote-19)

The phrase "*gavar chasdo al…*" appears elsewhere in the book of *Tehilim*, in *Tehilim* 113:11, and it is there that we might uncover its correct interpretation. In that psalm we find a succession of three metaphors for God's forgiving attitude toward Israel:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 11 | For as the heaven **is** **high** (*ki-gevo'ah*) above the earth, | **So great** (*gavar*) is his steadfast love toward those who fear Him. |
| 12 | **As far** (*ki-rechok*) as the east is from the west, | **So far** (*hirchik*) has He removed our transgressions from us. |
| 13 | **As** a father **pities** (*ke-rachem*) his children, | **So** the Lord **pities** (*richem*) those who fear Him. |

When we compare the three verses, it becomes clear that "*gavar chasdo*" means "*gavah chasdo*." So indeed some have suggested on their own to emend the text, even without support from manuscripts or the ancient translations.[[20]](#footnote-20) But the truth is that this is unnecessary; elsewhere in the Bible as well we find the root *gimmel-bet-resh* in the sense of *gimmel-bet-heh.*

In the story of the flood:

*Bereishit* 7:18: And the waters rose (*vayigberu*), and were increase greatly upon the earth…

*Bereishit* 7:19: And the waters rose (*vayigberu*) exceedingly upon the earth; and all the high mountains… were covered.

*Bereishit* 7:20: Fifteen cubits upwards did the waters rise (*gavru*); and the mountains were covered.

In verse 20, which measures the water's elevation, the words *gavru ha-mayim* clearly mean *gav-hu ha-mayim*, as the might (*gevura*) of the water is not measured in cubits. If so, this is also the way to understand the previous verses: "And the waters rose exceedingly upon the earth," their height being so great that "they covered all the **high** mountains."

We see then that the verb *gavar* in Scripture also bears the meaning of *gavah*. This might be because of the similarity between the two verbs, both with respect to the first two consonants of each verb, and with respect to their meaning: One who **prevails** over another person casts him to the ground and stands above him, and thus he is also **higher** than him, and therefore the two verbs can be interchanged.[[21]](#footnote-21)

We suggest therefore to understand (without emending the text) the two verses in *Tehilim* in which God's love "prevails" over man in the sense of height. As for our psalm, *ki gavar aleinu chasdo*, means: *ki gavah aleinu chasdo*.

In order to understand the expression *gavah chasdo*, it should be noted that the *chesed* bestowed upon a person comes from heaven:

57:4: He will send **from heaven,** and save me…

God shall send forth **His steadfast love and His truth.**

On the other hand, in several verses in the book of *Tehilim* God's love that is bestowed upon man is described as rising to heaven:

36:6: **Your steadfast love,** O Lord, **is in the heavens;**

**And your faithfulness reaches the clouds.**

57:11: For **your love** is great **unto the heavens,**

**And your truth to the clouds.**

108:5: **For your steadfast love** is great **above the heavens**;

**And your truth reaches the clouds.**

We see then that God's love is sent to man from heaven, and it rises from the earth to the clouds, and constitutes sort of a tall pillar that continually connects man to God. As the Psalmist writes in *Tehilim* 103:11:

For as the heaven is high above the earth,

so great is His steadfast love towards those who fear Him.

This is the meaning of the words: *Ki gavar aleinu chasdo*, in our psalm: God's eternal love is sent to us from heaven and binds us to the source of that love.

To be continued next week.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. This depends on whether the word "Halleluya" is written as a single word, as it is found in various sources, or as two words ("*Hallelu* *Ya*"), as it is found in other sources. The *Amora’im* disagreed about this issue, and after them the debate is recorded in the manuscripts of the Masoretes and the medieval commentators. For a summary of the various opinions, see *Minchat Shai* on *Tehillim* 104:35 (where the term "Halleluya" appears for the first time in the book of *Tehillim*). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The *Tosafot* relate to Psalm 135, where the call "Halleluya" appears twice: at the beginning of verse 1 and at the beginning of verse 3. The *gemara* states (according to the reading of the *Tosafot* and of the printed editions): "Regarding 'You who stand in the house of the Lord' (*Tehillim* 135:2), the 'Halleluya' that follows it [in verse 3], commences the [next] psalm." From here it follows that verses 1-2 in Psalm 135 are one psalm, and the rest of the verses (3-21) are a second psalm. But according to the *Tosafot*, verses 1-2 cannot be a separate psalm, "because it is impossible for the psalm to be [only] two verses," and therefore they join these two verses to the preceding psalm, Psalm 134. This is not the forum to expand further on this issue. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Here it should be noted that that the internal division of the psalms of *Hallel* (113-118) in the various manuscripts appears to reflect different customs regarding the recitation of *Hallel* in the communities of the scribes who copied these manuscripts. The various communities differed in their practices regarding this issue (and so to this very day). Most of them (apart from Yemenite Jewry) did not preserve the practice of reciting the *Hallel* that was followed in the days of *Chazal*, as it is documented in the two Talmuds and in the Rambam, *Hilkhot Chanuka* 3:12-14*.*

   The Rambam describes "the custom according to which *Hallel* was recited in the days of the early Sages," and he concludes his account with the words: "The above represents the custom followed in the early ages and it is fitting to adhere to it. At present, however, I have seen different customs in all places with regard to the reading of [the *Hallel*] and the responses of the people, not one of them resembling another."

   According to the ancient custom (followed by Yemenite Jewry to this very day), the reader reads a clause of the verse, and the congregation responds "Halleluya," and "thus, they respond 'Halleluya' 123 times throughout the entire *Hallel*" (the wording of the Rambam). However, "when the reader reaches the beginning of each and every chapter [i.e., the first verse of each psalm], the people repeat the line he recited. How so? When he recites the line *'Be-tzeit Yisrael mi-Mitzrayim*,' the people repeat the line '*Be-tzeit Yisrael mi-Mitzrayim*,' and the reader then recites '*Beit Ya'akov me-am lo'ez*,' and all the people respond, 'Halleluya.'" Later, the Rambam notes the verses that are recited by the congregation at the beginning of each psalm. At the end of *halakha* 13, he writes: "Similarly, when the reader reads '*Hallelu et Adonai kol goyim*,' the people all respnd, '*Hallelu et Adonai kol goyim.*'" According to this, this verse commences a new psalm. After this, the Rambam makes no mention of the opening verses of other psalms, implying that Psalms 117-118 were joined together as a single psalm.

   However, according to the custom of Yemenite Jewry, as it is documented in *Tachlal* "*Shivat Zion*," edited by R. Yosef Kapih (Jerusalem 5712), vol. 1, p. 209, not only 117:1 is repeated by the congregation, but 118:1 is similarly repeated. According to this version, Psalm 117 stands as an independent psalm of two verses. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The exception to this rule is the "Halleluya" in *Tehillim* 135:3, but according to the *gemara* in *Pesachim* 117a, it would appear that this verse as well opens a new psalm (see above, note 2). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See our study of Psalm 100, section I. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Psalm 116 is formulated in the first person singular by a psalmist who relates what happened to him from the time that he was surrounded by "the cords of death," and until he undertook to offer sacrifices of thanksgiving for his rescue in the courtyards of the house of the Lord. The psalm is uniform in its content and style. It is a typical personal psalm of thanksgiving, which is totally different from the two verses of Psalm 117, which fall into the category of psalms of praise. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In the verses found at the beginning of Psalm 118 (1-4), we find a general heading: "O give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; for His steadfast love endures forever." This is followed by a series of appeals with an identical format, but directed at different addressees to give thanks to God, all of which have the same conclusion, "that His steadfast love endures forever." The verses in our psalm are not built in that format. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Among the *Shirei Ha-Ma'alot* (most of which are short poems in comparison to most of the psalms in *Tehillim*), there are three that are comprised of only three verses: 131, 133, and 134 (which is similar in its general framework to our psalm). In our study of Psalm 131 in our book (p. 469), we demonstrated that the poem included in this psalm is only two verses long. It is clear from that study that two verses can constitute a rich, complex, and intense poem. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Some of the prophecies in the book of *Yeshayahu* starting in chapter 40 are very short, sometimes only one or two verses long. For example, see 60:21-22; 56:8; and others. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. In the books of *Kohelet* and *Mishlei*, we find short parables that stand on their own and are only one or two verses long. Similarly, in *Shir Ha-Shirim*, there are poems comprised of only one verse, e.g., 2:14; 3:6; 6:10. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The root *shin-bet-chet* in the sense of *hallel* appears in the book of *Tehillim* in only four other places: 63:4; 106:47 (and in the parallel psalm in *Divrei Ha-Yamim I* 16:35); 145:4; 147:12. Outside the book of *Tehillim*, the root appears two more times in *Kohelet* (4:2; 8:15). But in the Aramaic portion of *Daniel*, the root appears five times. For the sake of comparison, the root *heh-lamed-lamed* appears about 150 times in the Bible.

    It should be noted that the root *shin-bet-chet* in a different sense (to quiet or to calm) appears in two places in the book of *Tehillim*: 65:8; 89:10. It is found one more time in this sense in *Mishlei* (29:11). There is no connection between these two words (homonymy). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The noun *shevach*, which is so common in Rabbinic Hebrew, does not appear at all in Scripture. The root *shin-bet-chet* is common in Aramaic, and the Aramaic translations of the Bible use it to translate all forms of *hallel*, and sometimes also *hodaya* and *shira*. Thus, the Aramaic translation of our psalm uses the imperative *shabachu* in both clauses of the verse. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. According to the Even-Shoshan Concordance, the pair *chesed ve-emet* is found in twenty-three verses. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. For example, *Yeshaya* 16:5; *Tehilim* 57:11; 108:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. It is clear that the word *chesed* has different meanings in Scripture, and the same is true about the word *emet*. However, when they appear as a pair, they express a single idea. Here are two verses appearing in the story of the marriage of Yitzchak (*Bereishit* 24): "Blesse be the Lord… who has not left my master destitute of His love and His truth (*chaso ve-amito*)" (27); "And now if you will deal kindly and truly (*chesed ve-emet*) with my master" (49). The first pair describe God's relationship to man, while the second pair describe interpersonal relations. Another example from the words of Rachav to the spies, and their answer to her: "Since I have shown you kindness (*chesed*), that you will also show kindness (*chesed*) to my father's house, and give me a true (*emet*) token… And the men answered her… that we will deal kindly and truly (*chesed ve-emet*) to you" (*Yehoshua* 2:12-14).

    Some explain that in this pair of words, the word *emet* defines the nature of the *chesed* under discussion – *chesed* that expects no recompense – true, pure kindness. This, however, does not explain many verses in which this pair appears, for example, the verses cited above. The truth is that *chesed* by its very essence is an act of kindness that is performed without any expectation of recompense (see Yitzchak Heinemann, *Encyclopedia Mikra'it*, s.v. *chesed*, vol. III, p. 222). Since *chesed* stems by its very essence from *emet*, the two terms join together to form a single idea, or else they are split between two parallel clauses to express the same idea through synonymous parallelism. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Yeshaya* 54:8; *Tehilim* 40:12; 77:9; 89:29; 100:5; 138:8; and elsewhere. And similarly in the phrase that repeats itself many times in Scripture (and not only in the book of *Tehilim*): "For His steadfast love endures for ever." [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. In *Tehilim* 146:6: "Who keeps truth for ever (*le-olam*)"; in *Mishlei* 12:19: "The lip of truth shall be established for ever (*la-ad*)." [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. This is the meaning of the root *gimmel-bet-resh* in the great majority of the twenty-five instances where it appears as a verb in the Bible. Sometimes it denotes physical victory over an enemy, as in: "The men prevailed [*gavru*] against us [the Amonites against Yoav's men]" (II *Shemuel* 11:23). Elsewhere it is used in a borrowed sense, as in: "Iniquities prevailed [*gavru*] against me" (*Tehilim* 65:4). Several exceptions will be dealt with below. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Amos Chakham explains the verse as follows: "For His lovingkindness toward us has been revealed in mighty deeds. In other words, God has saved us by His might for the sake of His lovingkindness." But this does not resolve the difficulty, for the verse states that God's lovingkindness is mighty (*gavar*)toward us. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See Ginsburg's edition of the Bible, as well as the Biblia Hebraica edition, on this verse. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See J. L. Palache, *Semantic Notes on the Hebrew Lexicon*, Leiden 1959, pp. 17-18, in entries beginning with the consonants *gimmel-bet*, which denote height and superiority, and among which he mentions also the root *gimmel-bet-resh*. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)