YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**SEFER TEHILLIM**

**Lecture 16: The Difference Between "Happy is Everyone Who Fears the Lord" and "Thus Shall the Man Be Blessed Who Fears the Lord" – Psalm 128 (Part I)**

**Rav Elchanan Samet**

(1) A Song of Ascents.

1 Happy is everyone who fears the Lord,

who walks in His ways.

2 (2) If you eat the labor of your hands,

you will be happy and it will be well with you.

3 (3) Your wife will be like a fruitful vine

in the innermost parts of your house,

4 your children like olive saplings

around your table.

1. (4) Behold, thus shall the man be blessed

who fears the Lord.

6 (5) May the Lord bless you from Zion,

and may you see the good of Jerusalem

all the days of your life.

7 (6) And may you see your children's children.

Peace be upon Israel.

**I. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PSALM 128 AND PSALM 127**

Like psalm 127, psalm 128 is also a "wisdom psalm."[[1]](#footnote-1) It too is addressed to a person and is meant to enlighten and guide him in the paths of life: how should a man conduct his life, and what is the ideal life to which he should aspire. There are several substantive connections between this psalm and the previous one. Generally speaking, these connections do not express themselves on the linguistic level, and presumably they stem from fact that the two psalms belong to the same literary genre – wisdom literature. This literature has fixed motifs, which find expression in different ways. I wish to note here the principal connections between the two psalms, and also their differences with respect to those very connections:

1. Our psalm deals entirely with the God-fearing man, and it is this quality of fearing God that brings him all the good things described in the psalm. In this respect, our psalm is similar to the second half of Psalm 127 (including its central axis), which also deals with God's beloved and the good that God showers upon him. In both psalms, the weighty term, "*ashrei*"("happy"), is used to describe the good state of the individuals described therein: "**Happy** is everyone who fears the Lord…" at the beginning of our psalm, and "**Happy** is the man…" in the middle of the second half of Psalm 127.[[2]](#footnote-2) In this way a connection is established between these two psalms and other "*ashrei*" psalms in the book of *Tehilim*, which also fall into the category of "wisdom psalms."[[3]](#footnote-3)
2. The principal good with which God rewards His beloved in Psalm 127 is the blessing of many sons, "the sons of one's youth." In our psalm as well the God-fearing man is blessed with many sons. This is described in stanzas 3-4 in our psalm: When the psalmist describes the man's wife as a "fruitful vine," he means to say that she has many children. Stanza 4 refers to the children themselves: "your children like olive saplings around your table." This image is also meant to convey the idea of many children, as can be confirmed by anybody who is familiar with the living reality upon which this image is based.

The motif of children returns once again in our psalm in stanza 7: "And may you see your children's children." This blessing given to the God-fearing man advances us in time another generation past the blessing given to God's beloved in the previous psalm. There we find "the sons of one's youth" – the children born to person while he is still young, when he himself and his young sons join together to repel the enemies at the city gates. Our psalm describes the God-fearing man in his old age as well, when he merits seeing grandchildren. In general, the blessing of children in our psalm lacks the purposefulness that is so emphasized in the previous psalm. In our psalm, the sons are not presented as their father's partners in any critical task, but as sitting around his table. The blessing lies in their very existence in their father's house. The three-generational extended family is the good towards which our psalm's blessed man strives. The sons sitting around their father's table undoubtedly share in the labor, the fruit of which the entire family is eating (stanza 2), but this is not explicitly stated.

This difference between the blessing of children found in each of the two psalms stems from another difference between them: Psalm 127 describes life marked by constant security tension: "If the Lord does not guard the city, the watchman has preserved in vain"; "like arrows in the hand of a mighty man, so are the sons of one's youth… They will not be put to shame, when they speak with the enemies in the gate." The blessing of children is "mortgaged" to this critical security need. In our psalm there is no hint of war or security tension. On the contrary, the God-fearing man merits to see the good of Jerusalem (stanza 6), i.e., to live within it in security, "There is no breach and there is no leaving, and there is no outcry in our streets" (*Tehilim* 144:14). This idea is concisely expressed in our psalm's concluding words: "Peace be upon Israel."[[4]](#footnote-4)

1. Even the "negative" component of Psalm 127 has a contrasting parallel in our psalm (which is entirely positive): There it is stated: "It is vain for you who rise early, who sit late, who eat the bread of toil," which means that people's efforts to support themselves, engaging in hard labor from morning to night, will lead to nothing unless they accord with God's will. In contrast, our psalm says about the God-fearing man: "If you eat the labor of your hands, you will be happy and it will be well with you." Even the God-fearing man must toil for his bread, but he merits eating from the labor of his hands.

**II. DIFFICULTIES AND QUESTIONS WITH RESPECT TO OUR PSALM**

We opened this study by presenting Psalm 128 in the form of a poem: with short lines and divided into seven stanzas. All of the words are easy to understand, and its conceptual unity is clearly evident: it deals entirely with the God-fearing man and the ideal life that he merits. Even in a cursory reading, it is easy to see the development between the various stanzas. The beginning of the psalm speaks of the personal good coming to the God-fearing man and the good of his family (stanzas 2-4), whereas at the end of the psalm the God-fearing man merits seeing the good of Jerusalem and peace upon Israel (stanzas 6-7). What then remains to be explained with respect to this short and simple psalm?

The first step to all deeper comprehension is locating the difficulty. Questions and difficulties are the key to understanding and to uncovering meaning that is hidden from the superficial reader. We too will try to find difficulties in our psalm, asking once again: Is everything really so simple and easily understood?

Let us consider the grammatical persons that the psalm uses in relation to the God-fearing man. In stanza 1 he is referred to in third person: "Happy is everyone who fears the Lord," whereas in the continuation the psalm relates to him in the second person: "If **you** eat the labor of **your** hands**, you** will be happy and it will be well **with you,**" and so too in later stanzas.

The reader who remembers our study of psalm 91 will have no difficulty with this: Stanza 1 serves as the psalm's heading, in which the subject – the God-fearing man – is presented in objective manner in third person. After this heading, however, the psalm continues by addressing him in the second person, thus providing the idea with dramatic vitality.

If this is the case, however, how do we explain the fact that once again in stanza 5 the psalm refers to the God-fearing man in third person – "Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord"? And why does it once again speak of him in the second person in stanzas 6 and 7 until the end of the psalm? How are we to understand these repeated shifts from person to person over the course of the psalm?

Yet another question can be raised: In stanza 5 it says: "Behold, thus (*ki ken*) shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord." The words "*ki ken*" seem to be used in the sense of "in similar manner" = *"kemo khen*." But is the reference to the good things described earlier in stanzas 2-4, or perhaps to the good things described later in stanzas 6-7? Put differently: Does stanza 5 serve as a summary of what came before, or as an introduction to what comes afterwards?

According to the Meiri, these words allude to what was stated in stanzas 3-4. This also seems to be way the words were understood by the Radak and several modern commentators. The matter, however, remains somewhat ambiguous.

And finally, I wish to present the disagreement between the commentators regarding the meaning of stanza 2:

If ("*ki*") you eat the labor of your hands,

you will be happy and it will be well with you.

What is the meaning of the word "*ki*" (translated here as "if") in this verse?

It is clear from two rabbinic expositions of the verse that *Chazal* understood the first half of the verse as a condition – "*ki"* in the sense of *"im*" ("if"): "**If** you eat the labor of your hands, you will be happy and it will be well with you," or else they understood the word "*ki*" in the sense of "when": "**When** you eat the labor of your hands, **then** you will be happy and it will be well with you."

Ben Zoma teaches in *Avot* 4:1:

Who is rich? He who rejoices in his portion. For it is said: "If/when you eat the labor of your hands, you will be happy and it will be well with you."

A similar, but more complex exposition of the verse is suggested by Rabbi Chiyya bar Ami in the name of Ulla in *Berakhot* 8a. This exposition sets stanza 1 against stanza 2: In stanza 1 the term "happy" is applied to one who fears the Lord and walks in His ways, whereas in stanza 2, the words "you will be happy and it will be well with you" are applied to one who eats the labor of his hands. From here it is learned:

Greater is the man who lives from the labor [of his hands] than the one who fears heaven. For with regard to the one who fears heaven it is written: "**Happy** is the man that fears the Lord,"[[5]](#footnote-5) while with regard to the man who lives from his own work it is written: "If you eat the labor of your hands, **you will be happy, and it will be well with you**. "You will be happy" - in this world; "and it will be well with you" - in the world to come. But of the man that fears heaven it is not written: "And it will be well with you."[[6]](#footnote-6)

This understanding of the verse – as a conditional clause (but without the exegetical garb found in the words of Ulla) - characterizes the approach of the *Rishonim* (see, for example, the words of the Radak and the Meiricited in note 6).

Some modern commentators, however, have challenged this understanding.

Here are the words of Tzvi Peretz Chajes in "*Tanakh im Perush Mada'i*," published by Avraham Kahana (Zhitomir, 5663):

"***Ki*** you eat the labor of your hands" – some explain this in the sense of "if"… But this is not correct, **for it is not a condition, but a blessing:** "You shall eat the labor of your hands, and not give your labor to others." This is the way the Septuagint understands it… And some explain it in the sense of an emphatic: "Indeed, it is true" ("You shall indeed eat the labor of your hands")… And see in contrast to our verse, above 109:11: "And let strangers despoil his labor."

Shlomo Dov Goitein repeats and expands this understanding in his book, "*Iyyunim be-Mikra*" (Tel-Aviv 5727), in his explanation of the last section of the book of the *Tehilim* (pp. 202-203):

The God-fearing man in our psalm is blessed with four blessings: The first – "You shall eat the labor of your hands" – **that he will merit to enjoy the fruits of his labor**… Many have understood the word "*ki*" in this verse in the sense of "when"… So too it was understood… by Ulla in his famous exposition in tractate *Berakhot*… But the plain sense of the verse is different: "*Ki*" in the sense of "indeed"… And the meaning of the verse is as follows: "Happy is everyone who fears the Lord, for indeed… you shall eat the labor of your hands."

What is the nature of this blessing?… We are dealing with a great question… Namely, how is it possible to guarantee a person who toils the reward that he deserves.

We are dealing here not only with two different understandings of the word "*ki*," but with two different perceptions of the intent of the verse as a whole (and perhaps also other verses in the psalm): Is the psalm describing here the **positive qualities** of the God-fearing man who walks in His ways, or is it explaining the **recompense** to be received by such a man?[[7]](#footnote-7)How are we to decide this question?

Our initial impression that our psalm is void of difficulties appears to be baseless. We have raised three difficulties or questions, which indicate that we have not yet reached a full understanding of the psalm.

(To be continued.)

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. We discussed the wisdom psalms in the book of *Tehilim*, their characteristics, and their identification marks at the beginning of our study of Psalm 127, and in footnote 1 there. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. As we wrote in that study, the word "*ashrei"* is located precisely in the center of the second half of the psalm. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Psalm 1 and psalm 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The words, "peace be upon Israel," were exceedingly dear to our forefathers in the mishnaic and talmudic eras, who included them in mosaic floors in synagogues (e.g., the synagogue in Jericho), in dedicatory inscriptions, and on gravestones.

   These words appear a second time in the book of *Tehilim* at the end of psalm 125: "But as for those who turn aside their crooked ways, may the Lord carry away the workers of iniquity. Peace be upon Israel." The source of this formula seems to be our psalm, where it appears natural and in place (as opposed to what Chajes says in his "scientific" commentary to the book of *Tehilim*). In psalm 125, on the other hand, these words do not appear to be part of the body of the psalm, but rather they seem to have been added in order not to conclude the psalm with the words, "the workers of iniquity." See our comments on the various concluding formulas in the book of *Tehilim* in our study of Psalm 130, section 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The verse cited in the Gemara is *Tehilim* 112:1, "Happy is the man who fears the Lord," but it seems clear that the intended reference is the verse in our psalm, "Happy is everyone who fears the Lord," and that the verses were switched owing to their great similarity. This argument stems from the fact that the primary intent of this homilitic statement is to draw a contrast between two adjacent verses in psalm 128, and not between two distant and totally unrelated verses. For surely the word "*ashrei*" is found inmany verses in the book of *Tehilim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Despite the similarity between the *derasha* of Ulla and that of Ben Zoma, their respective messages seem to be different: Ben Zoma praises him who eats the labor of his hands **and is satisfied with that** – "happy with his lot." The contrasting quality is manifest in the "rich man" who amasses more and more wealth, but is never satisfied with what he has.

   Ulla, on the other hand, contrasts the person who lives from the labor of his own hands with the God-fearing man. This contrast requires clarification: Is one who lives off the labor of his own hands not a God-fearing man? Or is it that a God-fearing man cannot live off the labor of his own hands? Ulla seems to be referring to a God-fearing man who occupies himself in Torah and avoids work, living off the labor of others. Ulla's outlook is similar then to that of the Rambam, which finds its sharpest formulation in his commentary to tractate *Avot* 4:6.

   Two medieval commentators interpreted the psalm in the wake of *Chazal*. Anyone who carefully examines their comments will see that the first one – the Radak – explains the psalm in accordance with the exposition of Ulla, whereas the second one – the Meiri – explains it in accordance with the exposition of Ben Zoma, as we have explained the difference between the two expositions.

   Radak: "He speaks of the manner of his sustenance [= that of the God-fearing man], for the good is for him to live off his own labor, **and not benefit from others,** as long as he is able to toil himself."

   Meiri: "He specifies [= the qualities of one who walks in the paths of God]: **that he does not chase after money,** but rather he eats the labor of his hands by way of the proficiency of his actions." [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. An exhaustive summary of this exegetical controversy is brought in Amos Frisch, *Yegi'a Kapekha – Yachas ha-Mikra el ha-Avoda*, Ha-Kibbutz ha-Me'uchad, 5759, pp. 97-99. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)