YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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# **SEFER Tehillim**

**Lecture 29:**

**"indeed, for your sake we are being killed all the day"**

**Psalm 44 (part Ii)**

**Rav Elchanan Samet**

(1) To the director of music, for the sons of Korach,

a *maskil.*

1 (2) O God, we have heard with our ears,

our fathers have told us,

of the deed You did in their days, in days of old.

(3) You with Your hand drove out the nations, and

planted them.

You broke the peoples and cast them out.

(4) For they did not take possession of the land by

their own sword,

and their own arm did not save them,

but your right hand and Your right arm, and the

light of Your countenance, for you blessed them.

2 (5) You alone are my king, O God,

Command salvations for Yaakov.

(6) Through You we have smitten our enemies.

Through Your name we have trampled on those who rose

up against us.

(7) For I did not trust in my bow,

and my sword did not save me.

3 (8) When You saved us from our enemies,

and You put to shame those who hate us.

(9) We praised God all the day,

and we thanked Your name forever.

Sela.

4 (10) Even when You abandoned us and put us to shame,

and You did not go out with our armies,

(11) When You made us turn back from our enemy,

and those who hate us plundered us for themselves.

(12) When You gave us like sheep to be eaten,

and You scattered us among the nations.

(13) When You sold Your people for no sum,

and You did not set their prices high.

(14) When You made us a reproach to our neighbors,

a scorn and a derision to those round about us.

(15) When You made us a byword among the nations,

a shaking of the head among the peoples.

(16) All the day my humiliation is before me,

and shame covers my face,

(17) From the voice of him who taunts and blasphemes,

from the enemy and the avenger.

(18) All this has come upon us, yet we have not forgotten

You,

nor have we been false to Your covenant.

(19) Our heart has not turned back,

nor have our steps turned from Your way.

5 (20) [Even] when You broke us in the place of jackals,

and You covered us with darkness.

(21) I swear that we have not forgotten the name of our

God,

nor have we stretched out our hands to a strange

god.

(22) Surely God has searched this out,

for He knows the secrets of the heart.

(23) Indeed, for Your sake we are being killed all the

day,

we are regarded as sheep for the slaughter.

6 (24) Awake, why do you sleep, O Lord?

Arise, do not abandon us forever.

(25) Why do You hide Your face?

Why do You forget our affliction and oppression?

(26) For our soul is bowed down to the dust,

our belly cleaves to the ground.

(27) Arise and help us,

and redeem us for the sake of Your lovingkindness.

**IV. THE SECOND PART OF THE PSALM (VV. 10-27) – "YOU HIDE YOUR FACE"**

**1. SECTION 4 – THE GRAMMATICAL STRUCTURE**

Even though the word "Sela" separates section 3 and section 4, and essentially between the first part of the psalm and the second part, in terms of the logical and grammatical continuity, section 4 constitutes a direct continuation of section 3.

The word that creates the connection between the two sections is "*af*," which here means "also, even" (its usual meaning in Scripture). "*Af zanachta*…" means then "even when you abandoned us." It turns out, then, that the grammatical function of verse 10 is similar to the grammatical function of verse 8 in the previous section – to serve as a subordinate clause, which describes the circumstances standing behind what will be said in the main clause – how Israel reacted to God's actions.

Where then is the main clause? For this, one needs patience, since the main clause is preceded by not one subordinate clause, but by many such clauses, which spread across eight verses, which must be read "with a single breath." These eight verses, verses 10-17, describe many of God's actions with respect to Israel, all of which are the opposite of His actions as described in the first part of the psalm. Until verse 15, we find the direct actions of God: You abandoned us and put us to shame, You did not go out, You made us turn back, You gave us, You scattered us, You sold, You did not set their prices high, You made us, You made us. But even verses 16-17, which do not mention any direct action on the part of God with respect to Israel, describe **the results** of the previously mentioned acts of God. These verses provide a **personal** illustration of what was stated earlier in a slightly abstract manner.

Earlier it was stated:

(14) When You made us a **reproach** (*cherpa*) to our neighbors,

a scorn and a derision to those round about us.

(15) When You made us a byword among the nations,

a shaking of the head among the peoples.

How do these actions find practical expression? For this the psalmist shifts back into the singular (as he had done in verses 5 and 7, above) and illustrates how these actions became realized in his personal life:

(16) All the day my humiliation is before me,

and shame covers my face.

(17) From the voice of him who **taunts** (*mecharef*) and blasphemes,

from the enemy and the avenger.

It turns out then that these verses as well belong to the series of subordinate clauses that prepare us for the main clause. And what is the main clause?

This clause is found in verses 18-19 (and it too is not a single clause, but a series of clauses). However, because the subordinate clauses went on for so long, it became necessary to summarize them in a few words before the actual appearance of the main clause. This summary is accomplished by way of the following three words at the beginning of verse 18:

All this has come upon us.

The demonstrative pronoun, "all this," refers to all that was described in verses 10-17, and therefore the words "even when" govern this clause as well.

And finally we come to the main clauses:

(18) Yet we have not forgotten You,

nor have we been false to Your covenant.

(19) Our heart has not turned back,

nor have our steps turned from Your way.

The parallelism in verse 19 is defective: the word "*lo*" in the first part applies also to the second part, so that it means: "nor have our steps turned from Your way." The first part of verse 19 says that **our heart** did not turn back from God – i.e., that we remained faithful to Him in our hearts, whereas the second part adds that also in practice we did not turn from His way, i.e., from His Torah and commandments.

We must now go back to the word with which this lengthy section opened – "*af*" – which, as stated above, means "also, even." What does this word come to add? It clearly relates to the main clauses at the end of the section, "Yet we have not forgotten You, nor have we been false to Your covenant," and it comes to add what is stated in a similar account of Israel's actions: the reference, of course, is to what is stated in the main clause of the previous section (v. 9): "We praised God all the day, and we thanked Your name forever."

Here is a paraphrase of the entire argument in sections 3-4:

Section 3: When You shined Your face upon us and saved us from our troubles, we did not attribute the deliverance to ourselves, but rather we recognized that it was You who had delivered us, and we expressed this with praise and thanksgiving.

Section 4: However, even when You abandoned us, and brought upon us a series of calamities, and made us a reproach among the nations among whom You exiled us, even then we remained faithful to You and to the covenant that You made with us, both in our hearts and in our actions, just as we had been when You had shined Your face upon us.

The intensity of the complaint sounded in sections 3-4 is exceptional precisely because the complaint is not stated explicitly, but rather it is concealed in the connection between sections 3 and 4 and in their shared grammatical structure. Questions typical of psalms of complaint, such as "why" and "until when," are not explicitly raised here (this will only be done in the prayer at the end of the psalm), but they cry out from the text owing to the psalmist's very silence and failure to ask them.

The equation that arises from a comparison between sections 3 and 4 is very difficult: We, the people of God and partners to His covenant, are always faithful to Him, both when He shines His face upon us and when He abandons us, but He has totally reversed His relationship to His people for no reason! Fidelity to the covenant appears to be one-sided: "We have not been false to Your covenant." The argument is so strong that the psalmist dares not express it explicitly, and therefore he conceals it in the comparison that he draws between the two periods – the period of God's shining face and the period of His abandonment.

**2. THE CONTRAST BETWEEN SECTION 4 AND THE PREVIOUS SECTIONS**

As stated above, the description of God's attitude toward His people in section 4 is a complete reversal of the description in the first part of the psalm. This is the primary contrast around which our psalm is built, and because it is not explained and not understood, it constitutes grounds for complaint.

Just as the first part of the psalm relates to a lengthy historical period (not only the period of the conquest of Eretz Israel, but also the salvations that God brought afterwards), so too the second part of the psalm deals not with a one-time event, but with an ongoing historical process of ever greater abandonment.

The process of abandonment begins with God's "not going out with our armies." We already learned in the first part of the psalm that "they did not take possession of the land by their own sword, and their own arm did not save them, but Your right hand and Your arm, and the light of Your countenance, for You blessed them." Thus, when God does not go out with the armies of Israel, He removes His right hand, His arm and the light of His countenance, and what is left is a human sword and a human arm that cannot win in battle.

The necessarily results in Israel's defeat in war against their enemies, and this defeat is justly attributed to God who had abandoned them and failed to go out with their armies:

When You made us turn back **from our enemy**,

and **those who hate us** plundered us for themselves.

Let us pay attention to the contrast between this verse and verse 8 in section 3:

(8) When You saved us from **our enemies**,

and You put to shame those **who hate us**.

This is a two-fold contrast: Both the fate of Israel was reversed, and so too the fate of the enemies, for in place of the shame that God had heaped upon them in the first part of the psalm, they now plunder Israel who fall before them.

The military defeat before their enemies brings to a great calamity, the slaughter of Israel at the hands of their foes:

(12) When You gave us like sheep to be eaten.

What is most serious, however, is that this defeat brings to the exile of the people of Israel and their being scattered among the nations:

and You scattered us among the nations.

From here (verse 13) until the end of the account of the calamities that God brought upon His people (in verse 17), a description is provided of Israel's shame among the nations in the midst of whom they have been exiled. The **shame** that God heaped upon the enemies of Israel in the first part of the psalm, "**and You have put to shame those who hate us**," He heaps in the second part of the psalm upon Israel, but in a much harsher and more severe manner, resulting from their condition in exile. Not only in the field of battle "did You abandon us **and put us to shame**" (the opposite of "and You have put to shame those who hate us" – when they fought against us), but principally in the scattering of Israel among the nations:

(13) When You sold Your people for no sum,

and You did not set their prices high.

This verse means: "It was as if You sold us to the nations" (Radak). How did God do this? "You sold us in the manner of the sale of lowly things, which a person sells for a small sum… You made us into merchandise known for its lowliness, for even when You took us out to sell, You did not take us out with the presumption of being merchandise of value" (Meiri).

Now comes a description of Israel's shame among the nations, using all possible terms of disgrace:

(14) When You made us a **reproach** to our neighbors,

a **scorn** and a **derision** to those round about us.

(15) When You made us a **byword** among the nations,

a **shaking of the head** among the peoples.

(16) All the day **my humiliation** is before me,

and **shame** covers my face,

(17) From the voice of him who **taunts** and **blasphemes**,

from the enemy and the avenger.

The praise of God "**all the day**" (verse 9) is replaced by "**all the day** my humiliation is before me" (verse 16).

To summarize, the historical process described in section 4 is the opposite of the process described in the first part of the psalm: in the past – Israel had defeated their enemies (all three sections), whereas now their enemies defeat them (vv. 10-12); in the past – "Your right hand and Your arm and the light of Your countenance, for You blessed them" (verse 4), whereas now "You have abandoned us and put us to shame, and You do not go out with our enemies" (verse 10); in the past – God had driven out the nations from the land and gave it as an inheritance to Israel (verse 3), whereas now He drives Israel out of their land and scatters them among the nations (verses 12-13); in the past – glory for Israel and shame for their enemies, whereas now reproach, scorn, derision, humiliation and shame for Israel from their enemies.

**3. THE INTERNAL CONTRAST IN SECTION 4 BETWEEN GOD'S ACTION AND ISRAEL'S RESPONSE**

As in sections 1 and 2, so, too, in section 4 we find an internal contrast between the vigorous actions of God and the passivity of Israel. God's actions in both sections are described by way of a lengthy series of verbs (of course, the content in the first part of the psalm is the very opposite of that in the second part), whereas Israel's actions are described by way of actions that are negated by the word "*lo.*" Let us compare:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Part I | Part II |
| (4) For they did **not** take possession of the land by their own sword, and their own arm did **not** save them | (18) …Yet we have not forgotten You, **nor** have we been false to Your covenant. |
| (7) For I did **not** trust in my bow, and my sword did **not** save me. | (19) Our heart has **not** turned back, norhave our steps turned from Your way. |

In our discussion of section 1 we argued that the contrast between God's action and Israel's inaction is not a true contrast. The psalmist does not mean to say that Israel sat back and did nothing during the period of the conquest of Eretz Israel, for surely they fought in the manner of fighters to achieve that goal. The contrast is introduced in order to give sharp expression to Israel's religious recognition that their actions are worthless in the absence of Divine action.

The contrast in section 4,[[1]](#footnote-1) however, is true: Israel's inaction in relation to God is the very opposite of God's actions toward them:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| God | Israel |
| You abandoned (10), abandon us forever (24), forget (25) | We have **not** forgotten (18), we have **not** forgotten (21) |
| You have made us **turn back from** the enemy (11) | Our heart has **not turned back**, nor have our steps turned **from** Your way (19) |
| You gave us **like sheep to be eaten** (12) | Indeed, for Your sake we are being killed all the day, we are regarded **as sheep for the slaughter** (23) |

The sharpest contrast is not verbal. This is the contrast between "You sold Your people" (13), on the one hand, and "nor have we been false to Your covenant" (18) and the oath "I swear that we have not forgotten the name of our God, nor have we stretched out our hands to a strange god" (21), on the other.

Let us clarify this last contrast: What is meant by likening the exiling of Israel to God's selling them to the nations? "Someone who sells something does not expect that it will ever return to him" (Radak). That is to say, the image of a sale expresses God's absolute shirking off of Israel and His abandoning them forever in the hands of the nations.

This image contradicts explicit verses in the book of *Yeshayahu* that deal with the very same question – how are we to understand the ongoing exile from the perspective of God's relationship with Israel:

Thus says the Lord, Where is the bill of your mother's divorce, with which I have put her away? or which of my creditors is it to whom I have sold you? Behold, for your iniquities have you sold yourselves, and for your transgressions was your mother put away. (*Yeshayahu* 50:1)

The prophet means to say that exile is **not** a sale by which God sells Israel to the nations – their creditors. Exile is a punishment, and therefore after Israel serves their sentence, God will return them to Him, for even when they are in exile, they remain His people.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The Meiri notes the contradiction between our psalm and Yeshayahu's prophecy, and reconciles it as follows:

"You sold Your people" – that is to say, You lengthened the exile to the point that **it seemed** like a sale, where the seller does not expect that the sold object will return to him. Regarding this,[[3]](#footnote-3) they said… in the prophecies of consolation: "Or which of my creditors is it to whom I have sold you"…. But here it is likened to a sale, owing to the length of the exile.

Of course, the contradiction stems from the fact that our psalm is a psalm of complaint, whereas the verses in *Yeshayahu* are part of a prophecy of consolation. The Meiri alludes to this distinction.

In any event, the analogy of exile to a sale, whereby God sold Israel and thereby separated from them, stands in contrast to the account of Israel's reaction, that they remained faithful to the covenant with God, and did not stray after a strange God.

It turns out then that even though God's actions toward Israel reverse themselves between the first part of the psalm and its second part, Israel's response regarding their relationship with God remains the same – unconditional fidelity. This loyalty finds expression in the first part of the psalm in the fourfold negation: "For **not** by their own sword," "and their own arm did **not** save them," For **not** in my bow," "and my sword did **not** save me." At first glance, what is being described here is Israel's passivity. In truth, however, this is not the case. We already explained that in practice Israel conquered the land with the sword, and this fourfold negation comes to express their correct religious consciousness. There is no passivity here, not in their actual behavior, and not in their religious consciousness that it is God who conquered their land and defeated their enemies. This consciousness follows from a deep consideration of reality. At the end of the first part of the psalm, this consciousness finds expression in actual practice: Israel praises and thanks God for having saved them.

Similarly, in section 4, Israel responds to God's actions toward them with a fourfold negation: "We have **not** forgotten You," "**nor** have we been false to Your covenant," "our heart has **not** turned back," "**nor** (we already explained earlier that the negation in the previous clause governs this clause as well) have our steps turned from Your way." Here, even more than in the first part of the psalm, we are not dealing with passivity, but with inaction that involves enormous spiritual effort.

I wish to mention the words of A.L. Strauss regarding the repeated negation in psalm 131:

This unique character of the language of poetry is particularly striking regarding the function of negation… Negation in poetry sets the negated idea against the affirmed idea in the body of the poem as an inseparable part of it. A disharmonic relationship is created between the two concepts, a relationship of opposition, or even of struggle.

This is the way he explains the threefold negation in that psalm, "My heart is **not** haughty, **nor** are my eyes lofty, and I do **not** occupy myself with great things…:

The "no" comes to express tension directed toward the negated item, but not to remove it from the body of the work. That is to say, the internal form of our psalm does not speak of peace that existed from the outset, but rather peace that was achieved through struggle: My heart became haughty – but I put it down!

Applying these words to the repeated negation in section 4 of our psalm, we can say: Forgetting God, breaking His covenant, and turning back from Him in the heart and in practice, are not things altogether removed from our psalm. Their vigorous negation means to say that these actions, while perhaps constituting the expected human response to all of the harsh things that God did to His people, were nevertheless wholly rejected by Israel with great spiritual efforts. These efforts can be heard in the threefold repetition:

All this has come upon us,

yet we have **not** forgotten You,

**Nor** have we been false to Your covenant.

Our heart has **not** turned back,

nor have our steps turned from Your way.

(To be continued)

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. We include below expressions from the entire second part of our psalm, for all of it contains contrasts between God's actions toward Israel and Israel's inaction in relationship to Him. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This is also the meaning of the verse in *Yeshayahu* 52:3: "You were sold for nought; and you shall be redeemed without money," that is to say, your exile is not a real sale, for no money was received from the nations in exchange, and therefore your redemption will also be accomplished without money, because even in exile you belong to God, who does not have to buy you back from the nations. The Radak connects this verse to what is stated in our psalm, "When You sold Your people **for no sum**" – "like the prophet said: 'you were sold for nought.'" It is clear, however, that the two verses have opposite meanings. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I.e., regarding this possibility they said (in the midrash and in the verses of consolation) that it is really not so. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)