YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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# **SEFER Tehillim**

**by Rav Elchanan Samet**

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**Lecture 58: Psalm 122 – "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem" (Part I)**

(1) A Song of Ascents of David.

1 I was glad when they said to me:

 We are going to the house of the Lord.

1. Our feet were standing

 within your gates, O Jerusalem.

 (3) Jerusalem that is built.

 It is like a city that is united together.

2 (4) For the tribes went up there, the tribes of the Lord,

 a testimony to Israel, to give thanks to the name of the Lord.

 (5) For there they sat on thrones for judgment,

 the thrones of the house of David.

3 (6) Pray for the peace of Jerusalem.

 May they prosper who love you.

1. May peace be within your walls,

 prosperity within your palaces.

4 (8) For my brothers' and companions' sakes

 may I now say: Peace be within you.

 (9) For the sake of the house of the Lord our God,

 I will seek your good.

I was a still a youngster during the Six Day War. On the third day of the war, which fell out on Wednesday, 28 Iyar 5727, the shelling of Jerusalem abated and we left our bomb shelter and went home. During the afternoon, while listening to reports about the fighting coming from the old, massive radio in our house, the program suddenly stopped, and in a tremulous voice the broadcaster announced that the Old City of Jerusalem had been liberated. Twice, the broadcaster repeated the announcement, and silence fell upon our house. Immediately following his announcement, the broadcaster read psalm 122 in the book of *Tehillim*: "Our feet were standing within your gates, O Jerusalem. Jerusalem that is built. It is like a city that is united together," and I was sure that the psalm had been specially written in the book of *Tehillim* for this exalted moment. This was followed by the playing of Naomi Shemer's "Jerusalem of Gold," which we had first heard three weeks earlier on the night following Yom Ha-Atzma'ut*.* It was clear to me that the song was composed in anticipation of the liberation of Jerusalem, in order to stir up yearnings in our heart for the city that had been taken captive and swallowed up by the Arab legions.

Rarely does a chapter of Scripture enjoy current significance as sharply as at that moment. This is the force of the psalms of *Tehillim*; even though they had been written for their own time and their own place, readers across the generations have found in them expressions of their own sentiments, even when these expressions do not accord with the plain meaning of the psalm.

In anticipation of 28 Iyar, Jerusalem Liberation Day, forty-three years following the event described above, I wish to return to psalm 122 in order to examine it for its own sake, to understand the plain meaning of its verses, to properly divide it into stanzas, to recognize its structure, and from all this, to grasp its unique message. But whether I want to or not, all of this literary analysis will perforce be carried out under the impressions left by the youthful experiences that I had along with the rest of the members of that generation.

### I. what is the connection between David and the songs sung by those on a Pilgrimage to the house of the Lord?

A general question can be raised regarding our psalm: what is the historical-social reality that gave rise to it? Put differently, What are the circumstances in which or for which our psalm was composed?

This psalm is one of the few psalms in the book of *Tehillim* regarding which the body of the psalm seems to be ill-suited to its heading. The heading reads, "A Song of Ascents of David,"[[1]](#footnote-1) whereas the body of the psalm describes a pilgrimage to the house of the Lord and the tribes going up to Jerusalem. As we all know, David did not build God's Temple, and thus in his time the tribes did not go up three times a year to the place that God chose. Moreover, the psalm describes Jerusalem as the place of "the thrones of the **house** of David," implying that the descendants of David were already sitting on the royal throne in Jerusalem.

This contradiction appears to underlie R. Yehoshua ben Levi's words in *Makkot* (10a):

R. Yehoshua ben Levi said: What is that which is written: "A Song of Ascents of David. I was glad when they said to me: We are going to the house of the Lord"? David said before the Holy One, blessed be He: Master of the universe, I have heard people saying, ‘When will this old man die, so that his son Shlomo will come and build the Temple and we will go on pilgrimage,’ and I was glad.

According to this, "I was glad" is David's reaction to the things he heard the members of his generation saying about him: "[When] will we be going to the house of the Lord?" Needless to say, this solution was proposed in a midrashic vein, and was never intended to account for the plain sense of the psalm.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The solution adopted by many of the commentators trying to uncover the plain sense of the text is that David composed our psalm on behalf of future generations. But the question remains - for which generations?

1) The Radak and R. Yeshaya explain that "our psalm was recited by the members of the exile. Owing to their great yearning for the rebuilding of the Temple, they would mention Israel's festival pilgrimages and they would speak in the voice of their ancestors who lived during the period of the Temple" (wording of the Radak).

The Meiri (in one of his two explanations) offers a similar explanation - that "this psalm should be understood as referring to the members of the exile… He prophesies about the tidings of redemption, that when the time of redemption comes and the voice of salvation goes forth, the people's joy over the tidings will be great. And in order to magnify the superiority of the salvation, he speaks at length of the praises of Jerusalem, saying: 'Our feet were standing…,' That is, when you were in your fullness."[[3]](#footnote-3)

Explanations of this sort, which understand the psalms in the book of *Tehillim* as prophecies uttered for the sake of the members of the exile, are very common in the commentaries of the *Rishonim*, and they stem from the desire to turn the book of *Tehillim* into one that expresses the sentiments of the Jewish people during the period in which these commentators lived. However, an examination of the text of the psalm reveals no hint whatsoever to the exile![[4]](#footnote-4)

2) In our study of psalm 44,[[5]](#footnote-5) we mentioned the view of R. Moshe Ha-Kohen Gikitila regarding the book of *Tehillim,* "that this book contains no prophecy about the future… all the psalms attributed to the sons of Korach were written by one of the singers descending from the children of Heman who were in Babylonia, for their words indicate exile."[[6]](#footnote-6) These words conceal two assumptions that are exceptional in the traditional commentaries: a) the psalms of *Tehilim* that reflect historical events were written by poets who experienced these events and lived in the generations in which they occurred. b) The book of *Tehilim* includes psalms that were written the entire length of the biblical period, until the exile to Babylonia and the return from it. In order to support this view, R. Moshe makes great efforts to match the time implied by the contents of each of the psalms to the time of the author mentioned in the headings of those psalms.[[7]](#footnote-7)

It is obvious, then, that R. Moshe could not accept the solution proposed by the commentators above, that David composed the psalm by way of prophecy regarding the distant future. How then did R. Moshe resolve the contradiction between the content of our psalm, which reflects a reality in which the Temple is standing, and the mention of David in its heading?

The Ibn Ezra, who often cites from R. Moshe's commentary (which was written in Arabic), quotes from it at the beginning of his own commentary to our psalm:

R. Moshe said that David composed this song so that it would be recited with the [other] songs in the house of God when it would be built.

He also agrees, then, that David composed this psalm so that it should be recited in the future – not for distant generations, the people living in exile or those living at the time of the Third Temple, but rather for the near generations, people living in David's own time who would merit to see the building of the Temple in the days of his son Shlomo.

R. Moshe's assumption frees him from having to attribute prophecy to David. Surely David knew from Natan the prophet that his son Shlomo would build the Temple. And just as David prepared the materials with which his son would build the Temple, as is described at length in *Divrei Ha-yamim* I 22, so too he prepared the songs that would be recited in the house of God after it was built.

3) The commentators whom we have brought thus far all assume that the mention of David's name in the psalm's heading testifies to the fact that he is the author of the psalm. It stands to reason that this is true about most of the psalms in the book of *Tehillim* whose headings include one or more names of people. There are, however, certain psalms regarding which it is more reasonable to assume that the heading contains a dedication of the psalm to the person mentioned therein. Thus, for example, the heading of psalm 127, "A Song of Ascents of Shlomo (*li-Shelomo*)," is understood by the Ibn Ezra as follows: "**For** Shlomo, like, 'And for Levi he said' (*Devarim* 33:8). This song was composed by one of the singers for Shlomo." The Radak proposes a similar explanation. The heading of psalm 72, "*Li-Shlomo*," was understood by the commentators in similar fashion - for Shlomo. Accordingly, it is not impossible that the heading "*Le-David*" should also sometimes be understood as "for David - in his honor."[[8]](#footnote-8)

If we understand the psalm's heading in this manner, there is no reason to attribute our psalm to a period during which the Temple was not standing, neither to the period of David nor to the period of the exile. Our psalm very clearly reflects the experience of making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and it is therefore reasonable to assume that its author participated in this uplifting experience.[[9]](#footnote-9) And how appropriate it is that this unknown psalmist should have dedicated his song to David! It was David who dedicated his life to the construction of the Temple,[[10]](#footnote-10) and it was he who established a dynasty of kings who ruled generation after generation – "the thrones of the house of David."[[11]](#footnote-11)

In any event, it may be argued that our psalm is the song of pilgrims to Jerusalem who went up to the house of God. And indeed, during the Second Temple period, pilgrims to Jerusalem recited the verses of our psalm, as will be demonstrated below.

### II. THe song of pilgrims

The only description of pilgrimages to Jerusalem during the Second Temple period that has been preserved in rabbinic literature – in the Mishna, the Tosefta and the Jerusalem Talmud – relates not to pilgrimages made on the three pilgrim festivals, but rather to pilgrimages to Jerusalem undertaken by those bringing *bikkurim* (first-fruit) to the city. It is clear from the account in tractate *Bikkurim* that the people bringing *bikkurim* from an entire district – "*ma'amad*" – would assemble together in order to bring the *bikkurim* as part of a large contingent:

How were the *bikkurim* taken up [to Jerusalem]? All [the inhabitants of] the cities that constituted the *ma'amad* assembled in the city of the *ma'amad*, and spent the night in the open place thereof… Early in the morning, the officer said: "Let us arise and go up to Zion, into the house of the Lord our God" (*Yirmiyahu* 31:5).[[12]](#footnote-12)

Those who lived near brought fresh figs and grapes, but those from a distance brought dried figs and raisins. An ox with horns bedecked with gold and with an olive-crown on its head led the way. The flute was played before them until they were near to Jerusalem.

And when they arrived close to Jerusalem they sent messengers in advance[[13]](#footnote-13) and ornamentally arrayed their *bikkurim.* The governors and chiefs and treasurers [of the Temple] went out to meet them. According to the rank of the entrants they would go forth. All the skilled artisans of Jerusalem would stand up before them and greet them: "Brethren, men of such and such a place, we are delighted to welcome you."

The flute was playing before them till they reached the Temple Mount; and when they reached the Temple Mount, even King Aggripas would take the basket and place it on his shoulders and walk as far as the Temple courtyard. At the approach to the courtyard, the Levites would sing the song: "I will extol You, O Lord, for You have raised me up; and have not suffered my enemies to rejoice over me." (*Bikkurim* 3:2-4)

The *Yerushalmi* (*Bikkurim* 3:2) brings a *baraita* that completes the description of the pilgrimage found in the mishna:

On the road they would say: "I was glad when they said to me: We are going to the house of the Lord." In Jerusalem they would say: "Our feet were standing within your gates, O Jerusalem.”

It stands to reason that the words "they would say" in this *baraita* do not mean that they would say this once as a proclamation, but rather that they would recite these verses over and over whenever they set off on their journey, and similarly when they arrived in Jerusalem.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Of course, the *mishna*'s description of the pilgrimage made by those bearing their *bikkurim* also fits the pilgrimage made on the three pilgrim festivals. Does the continuation found in the *baraita* brought in the *Yerushalmi* also fit the pilgrim festivals? Here there is room for doubt.

The *mitzva* of making a pilgrimage on the pilgrim festivals falls on each and every individual. But owing to the fact that all the pilgrims fulfilled their obligations on the same date, it stands to reason that they did so in great numbers as part of a mass pilgrimage.

The *mitzva* of bringing *bikkurim* to the Temple – "And you shall put it in a basket, and shall go to the place which the Lord your God shall choose to place His name there" (*Devarim* 26:2) – is also a *mitzva* that falls upon each and every individual who farms his land. There is, however, no single date on which to fulfill this *mitzva*: "From Atzeret [Shavuot] to the festival [Sukkot], he brings and recites [the obligatory passage]" (*Bikkurim* 1:6). Accordingly, each person could bring his *bikkurim* on a day that suited him and his produce.

Nevertheless, we see from the *mishna* that the *bikkurim* were brought to the Temple in the context of a large congregation. As opposed to the pilgrimages on the festivals, the pilgrimages of those bringing their *bikkurim* did not take place all at the same time from all parts of *Eretz Yisrael*, but rather each district would go up to Jerusalem at a different time. Upon what did the date of the pilgrimage depend? Upon the climatic and agricultural character of each different district. *Eretz Yisrael* is a land of mountains and valleys, and the growing place of various different kinds of produce. Dates grow in its valleys and other fruit of the seven species grow on its mountains. Some mountains grow grapes, others olives. The different climates in the various parts of the land also cause the same fruits to ripen at different times. Each district, depending upon its geographical-climatic and agricultural character, set its own time for bringing *bikkurim* in accordance with its climate and special produce.[[15]](#footnote-15)

How did the farmers of a particular region know that it was time for them to assemble together in order to bring their first-fruit to the Temple? This question does not arise regarding the pilgrimages to Jerusalem on the three pilgrim festivals: there each person knew the date on which to leave his house in order to arrive in Jerusalem before the festival, and convoys of pilgrims would form in a most natural manner. But in the case of *bikkurim*, there was no fixed date each year!

It stands to reason that each year the elders of the region would set a date for assembling together for the purpose of going up to Jerusalem based on the special factors regarding the ripening of the fruits in that area, and messengers would inform all the farmers that on a particular day, all should assemble in "the city of the *ma'amad*."

Indeed, our psalm opens with the call:

I was glad when they said to me:

We are going to the house of the Lord.

Only those going up to Jerusalem with their *bikkurim* required that "they should say to them" that they were going up to the house of the Lord! The pilgrims going up to Jerusalem for the three pilgrim festivals did not need such a call, for they knew on their own when to set out.

It is possible, then, that our psalm is the psalm of those going up to Jerusalem with their *bikkurim*, the verses of which were recited on their way to and when they arrived in the city, as is described in the *baraita* in the *Yerushalmi*.[[16]](#footnote-16)

(To be continued.)

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. And similarly in the headings of the Songs of Ascent 124, 131 and 133. The heading of Song of Ascents 127 reads, "A Song of Ascents of Shlomo." [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rashi cites this *derasha* in his commentary to verse 1.

The Meiri makes an interesting attempt to explain the psalm in accordance with its plain sense as describing an event in David's life:

If we explain it as referring to David himself, this is the explanation: When David said to Natan the prophet, "See now, I dwell in a house of cedar, but the ark of God dwells within curtain," and Natan answered him, "Go, do all that is in your heart, for the Lord is with you" (see *Shmuel* II 7 and *Divrei Ha-yamim* I 17), before he received the prophecy, "You shall not build the house" - he said: "I was glad when they said to me, We are going to the house of the Lord." That is to say: Regarding what Natan said to me, "Do all that is in your heart." I was sure that I would build it, and that "our feet would be standing within your gates," and the word "*hayu*" is a past tense ("were") that serves as a future tense ("would be"), and that it would be built and the tribes would go up there and they would sit on the thrones of justice – all past tense serving as a future tense.

But when he saw that his hopes would not be fulfilled, he said his words (beginning with verse 6) as one who yearns and laments about his inability to realize his desire. And he stirred his contemporaries, since he did not merit to build the Temple, neither him, nor them, his people, that they should bless it and pray to God for its peace and the peace of those who love it.

This explanation also does not accord with the plain sense of the psalm, and the Meiri would never have dreamed of suggesting it as an explanation of the body of the psalm, had he not been forced to do so by the psalm's heading. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The difference between the Meiri and the two earlier commentators is that they explained the psalm as a song of yearning for Jerusalem, uttered in the sorrow of exile, whereas the Meiri seems to recognize that there is not the slightest hint of sorrow hanging over the psalmist. He therefore attributes the psalm to those in the exile who will utter it when they hear the tidings of redemption. Mentioning the praises of Jerusalem when it was at its height serves as psychological preparation for the rebuilding of Jerusalem in the near future. See below note 4c. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. a. What made it easier for these commentators to attribute our psalm to the people in exile is the contradiction between the heading, which attributes the psalm to David, and the body of the psalm, which clearly describes a period that does not accord with that of David. Thus, we are forced to adopt the accepted resolution that David spoke of the future by way of the holy spirit. This being the case, it is possible to push off this future to the period of the exile.

b. It should be noted that the Radak's explanation of our psalm follows from his understanding of all the Songs of Ascent as "songs uttered as if by the people in exile" (see beginning of psalm 120).

c. The Ibn Ezra brings an explanation that pushes off even further the future to which our psalm is referring: "There are those who say [that David uttered our psalm] with respect to the Third Temple." According to this explanation, we have here not a description of Jerusalem **in the past,** but rather a description of Jerusalem in the present, but this present is the prophetic present: the present of the people of the Third Temple period, in whose mouths David put his words by way of the holy spirit. This explanation does not follow at all from the body of the psalm, but solely from the contradiction between the heading and the body. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Section VII, especially notes 1, 2 and 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The citation is from the Ibn Ezra's introduction to the book of *Tehillim*. R. Moshe's name is not mentioned there, but it is clear that the Ibn Ezra is referring to him. See at length in U. Simon, *Arba Gishot Le-Sefer Tehilim* (Bar Ilan, 5742). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This leads him to the conclusion that some of the people mentioned in the headings lived during the period of the exile, and not, as is generally accepted, in the generation of David. See his comments cited earlier regarding the sons of Korach. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. There is, however, a difference between the heading "*Li-Shlomo*" and what we are saying about the heading of our psalm: There, the commentators propose that the psalm was composed [by David or one of the other psalmists] for Shlomo in order to educate him or to bless him, whereas here we are suggesting that our psalm was composed in honor of David following his death. The common denominator between all these explanations is that the letter *lamed* that precedes a name can be understood as "for" (compare to the heading of psalm 92: "A psalm, a poem for the Sabbath day"). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. It is difficult to attribute such an authentic account of the experience of going up to Jerusalem to someone who never experienced it, and not even to David, as was proposed by R. Moshe Ha-Kohen. This problem is not as striking in the Radak's explanation, for he understands our psalm as a song of yearning for Jerusalem on the part of the people in exile: they give expression to the concrete experience of making a pilgrimage that either they or their parents had during the time of the Temple. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See psalm 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. As Brill says in his commentary: "*Le-David* – this means: for David, who conquered the city of Jerusalem from the hands of the Yevusi, built it, established his throne in it, and caused the ark of the covenant to rest there." [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The officer's call brings to mind the words of the "sayers" in our psalm: "We are going to the house of the Lord." [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Their stopping in this place brings to mind what is stated in our psalm: "Our feet were standing within your gates, O Jerusalem." [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. a. It is twice mentioned in the *mishnayot* cited above that "the flute was played before them:" both when the people were on the way to Jerusalem and when they were in the city on the way to the Temple Mount. It stands to reason that they advanced singing and playing musical instruments.

b. It is difficult to conclude from the account in the *Yerushalmi* whether they would only sing these two verses from our psalm, or perhaps they would also sing the rest of the psalm after entering the city. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. a. Thus we learn (*Bikkurim* 1:3): "*Bikkurim* are not brought… from dates grown on hills [where they do not grow well], or from valley-fruits [from fruit that does not grow well in valleys]… that are not of the best kind." The farmers in each region brought the fruits that their region excelled in.

b. The significance of the fact that the Sages turned the *mitzva* of *bikkurim*, which falls upon each individual, into a *mitzva* that is fulfilled in the framework of a mass of people is explained in my study of *Parashat Ki-Tavo* (1st series), pp. 294-295. Our comments above regarding the pilgrimages and psalm 122 were taken from that study. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. As stated above, these ideas appeared earlier in my study of *Parashat Ki-Tavo*. When I included these ideas in the present study, I saw that similar ideas were alluded to by R. Yehuda Shaviv in his book, "*Yesod Ha-Ma'ala – Iyunim Be-Shirei Ha-Ma'alot Bi-Tehillim*," p. 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)