YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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# **SEFER Tehillim**

**by Rav Elchanan Samet**

**Lecture 59: Psalm 122 – "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem" (Part II)**

(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.

### III. the four stanzas of the psalm

Joel Brill, at the end of his short commentary to our psalm,[[1]](#footnote-1) adds an unusual comment:

How pleasant and becoming is this short poem

It is wholly delightful, entirely sweet

As the intelligent reader will perceive.

It goes without saying that this heartfelt comment does not substitute for a systematic analysis of the psalm. Only the "intelligent reader" – who invests his finest intellectual powers in reading the psalm – will merit to taste the sweetness of "this short poem."

Our psalm, as we presented it at the beginning our study, is divided into four stanzas. The first stanza is comprised of three lines (three verses), whereas the rest of the stanzas are comprised of two lines/verses in each stanza.

This division is based first and foremost on the style of the psalm. Apart from the first stanza, which we shall discuss below, the rest of the stanzas are built around a striking doubling in the two lines of each stanza. In each stanza, one or more words are repeated in each of the two lines of the stanza in a fixed place. In some of the stanzas, the two lines also have a similar grammatical structure, which creates parallelism between the two lines of the stanza.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Let us illustrate this with regard to stanzas 2-4:

Stanza 2:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **For there** | Went up | the tribes… |
| **For there** | They sat | thrones… thrones |

Stanza 3:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Pray for | the **peace** | of Jerusalem. May they **prosper** who love you. |
| May | **peace** | Be within your walls, **prosperity** within your palaces.[[3]](#footnote-3) |

Stanza 4:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **For the sakes of** | my brothers and companions | may I now say: | Peace be within you. |
| **For the sake of** | the house of the Lord our God | I will seek | your good.[[4]](#footnote-4) |

Stanza 1 clearly differs from the three stanzas that follow it: it consists of three lines which exhibit no doubling or parallelism. On the contrary, they follow one upon the other in logical and chronological succession. The stylistic connection between the lines in this stanza accords with this character. It is a linking connection; that is to say, the end of one line is connected to the beginning of the line that follows.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The connection between the end of the first line and the beginning of the second line is based on linguistic contrast:

We are going / Our feet were standing

What this means is that after "going" from the city of the psalm's speaker, he, along with many other people, arrive at the gates of Jerusalem. When they reach that place, close to their final destination (the house of the Lord), "our feet were standing" for a short period, so that they could take in the view of the city unfolding before them and so that they could prepare for the welcome that they would receive (see the *mishna* brought in the previous section and note 13).

The connection between the end of the second line and the beginning of the third line is the repetition of the word "Jerusalem." This means that while their feet are standing at the gates of Jerusalem, they contemplate the city that reveals itself in its entirety before them, and from their mouths issues forth the cry: "Jerusalem that is built."

This structure of the psalm is based primarily on the psalm's style (only regarding stanza 1 did we go a little bit into its contents). The question that rises now is whether this division into four stanzas also has substantive meaning. Is the doubling that is characteristic of stanzas 2-4 a means for expressing a certain idea, and is it the same or a similar idea in all of the stanzas? And is there continuity of any kind between the stanzas? Before we attempt to answer these questions, let us make several exegetical comments about the four stanzas of the psalm.

### IV. Exegetical comments regarding the four stanzas

**Stanza 1**: Two stylistic phenomena call for our attention in the first two lines of this stanza. First, there is the past tense of the verbs "*samachti*" ("I was glad") and "*omedot hayu*" ("were standing"). Amos Chakham[[6]](#footnote-6) proposes two possible ways to understand this past tense usage:

"*Samachti*"… This statement is made as if by someone who has gone on pilgrimage to Jerusalem and on his return he describes how he felt and what he saw there… According to this explanation, "*samachti*" is a past tense, and the meaning of "*hayu*" is also past tense.

According to another explanation, "*samachti*" is a present tense: "I am glad," and the statement was made at the time the pilgrims set out on their journey to Jerusalem. "*Omedot hayu*" – here too it is a present tense: "Behold, they are standing."

In the body of his commentary, Amos Chakham adopts the first explanation, and in the conclusion to the psalm he clarifies the difference between the two explanations with respect to the rest of the psalm:

In our commentary, we have adopted the interpretation that the psalm reflects the language of pilgrims **who have completed** their visit to Jerusalem and are about to leave the city and return to their homes. The psalmist begins by describing his joy when he and the members of his group began walking to the house of the Lord… **and he ends with a blessing of farewell**, a prayer for the peace of Jerusalem.

According to the second interpretation, it is possible that the whole psalm was recited by pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem, **while they were traveling toward it** and when they stood at the gates of the city as they were about to enter it. Thus, the blessings of peace were **blessings expressed on the arrival of the pilgrims, and not blessings of departure**.

The second stylistic phenomenon that requires explanation is the transition from first person singular in the first line – "**I** was glad when they said to **me**" – to first person plural in the second line – "**Our** feet were standing."

The beginning of this transition is found already at the end of the first line, in the citation of the words of the "sayers," whose words the speaker was glad to hear: "**We are going** to the house of the Lord." Here lies the explanation of the transition: the tidings about the imminent going to the house of the Lord reached each and every individual, and therefore "I was glad when they said to me;" but the going itself was done in a large group, and therefore "we are going to the house of the Lord" and "our feet were standing."[[7]](#footnote-7)

The most serious exegetical difficulty in our psalm is found in the third line of stanza 1:

Jerusalem that is built.

It is like a city that is united together.

What is "a city that is united together"? Various midrashic expositions have been offered to explain these words, and several explanations have been proposed for them that adhere to the plain meaning of the text. Let us first examine the Meiri's understanding of the verse:

Jerusalem that is built – that is to say complete with adorned and elaborate construction.

It is like a city that is united together – there being no empty space, but rather it is all built up and all filled in.

Amos Chakham offers a similar explanation:

All her buildings appear to be joined together and to form a unity, without gaps and empty spaces. The psalmist says "as a city," using the letter *kaf* as a comparative prefix… [because] in truth a city cannot exist without streets and courtyards that separate the buildings.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Another explanation of our verse was recently proposed. The city of Jerusalem is united together by way of the joining of the western hill – the upper city (which includes what is called today Mount Zion and the Jewish Quarter of the Old City), to the eastern hill – the lower city (the City of David).

The question regarding the time that biblical Jerusalem spread out to the western hill has been the subject of disagreement among archaeologists for several generations. Until the Six Day War, the dominant view (supported by the famous archaeologist Kathleen Kenyon[[9]](#footnote-9)) maintained that throughout the biblical period, Jerusalem was restricted to the eastern hill in the City of David. After the war, however, when the upper city was opened to Israeli archaeologists, Nachman Avigad uncovered in 1970 in the heart of the Jewish quarter a portion of a very broad wall, which has been identified as the wall of Jerusalem in the days of Chizkiyahu, putting a final end to the disagreement.

Were the upper city and the lower city united together within a single shared wall even earlier? This question cannot yet be answered with certainty.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Either way, this attractive explanation explains the pilgrim's excitement about what he sees before him. It would appear that the project of connecting the two parts of the city, an enormous and complicated engineering undertaking,[[11]](#footnote-11) had only recently been completed, and the pilgrim coming to Jerusalem lifts his eyes in great animation to the city which had spread out over an area immeasurably greater than its earlier borders. The unification project had brought the city up to the high ridge towering above the City of David. The city was filled with new buildings and encompassed by a long, broad wall that turned the two parts of the city and the valley between them into a "city that is united together."

The Six Day War and its consequences have provided a basis for this explanation. Now, the explanation that we offered on the 28th of Iyyar 5727, that "like a city that is united together" is united Jerusalem – east and west, that have become one - is no longer so far from the plain sense of the text. It is merely an updated version of the other explanation that we have brought. And since this homiletical explanation preceded the archaeological discoveries that followed it, we can say that the homiletical explanation has paved the way to the plain sense of Scripture.

**Stanza 2:** Two words in the first line, "*edut le-Yisrael*," require explanation. The Ibn Ezra seems to have captured their plain sense:

*Edut* – the statute and commandment to come three times.

The word "*edut*" appears in another four places in the book of *Tehillim* in the similar sense of statute and commandment.[[12]](#footnote-12) And the word "*edot*" in the sense of laws and commandments appears in dozens of other places in the book of *Tehillim* and elsewhere in Scripture.[[13]](#footnote-13) It stands to reason that there is a connection between these two words when they appear in this sense.

Accordingly, the tribes' going up to Jerusalem is "a statute in Israel," the reference of course being to the *mitzva* of making a pilgrimage three times a year to the place that God will choose.

In the second line of the stanza, the question arises whether the expressions "thrones for judgment" and "thrones of the house of David," refer to the same thrones - the words "thrones of the house of David" standing in apposition to the words, "thrones for judgment" – or whether we are dealing with two different institutions, the court and the royal house.[[14]](#footnote-14)

The parallelism between the two lines that comprise stanza 2, which we noted earlier, alludes to the answer. In the first line as well, the subject of the sentence is repeated:

For the tribes went up there, the tribes of the Lord.

Just as the words, "the tribes of the Lord," explain the term "tribes," so too the words "thrones of the house of David" explain the words "thrones for judgment."

The role of the kings of the house of David to judge those who come to them for judgment is mentioned in several places in Scripture.[[15]](#footnote-15)

**Stanza 3**: The speaker in the two clauses of verse 6 directs his words at two different addressees. In the first clause, he addresses the pilgrims who came with him to Jerusalem and calls to them, "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem." In the second line, he directs his words to Jerusalem (about which he spoke in third person in the previous line), and calls out to it, "May they prosper who love you." How do these two parts of the verse combine to form a unified statement?

Rashi, the Ibn Ezra, and the Meiri explain that the words "May they prosper who love you" constitute a realization of the cry, "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem." In other words, this is a citation of the words that are supposed to be (or that are actually) said by the pilgrims in Jerusalem.[[16]](#footnote-16) This understanding, however, is difficult: Is the peace of the city identical with the peace of those who love it (apparently the pilgrims arriving for the festival)? Surely when they say, "May they prosper who love You," they are praying for themselves, and not for Jerusalem!

More persuasive, then, is the understanding offered by the Radak that we are dealing here with two separate statements:

Pray – to God for the peace of Jerusalem… and afterwards he says regarding Jerusalem: May they prosper who love you.

But what is the connection between these two statements?

It seems that the connection between them is one of cause and effect. Praying for the peace of Jerusalem, should that prayer be accepted, will bestow benefit upon those very people who offer that prayer. This is explicitly stated in the words of *Yirmiyahu* (29:7):

And seek the peace of the city…[[17]](#footnote-17) and pray to the Lord for it [Seek the peace of Jerusalem]; for in its peace **you** shall have peace [May they prosper who love you].

The actual praying for the peace of Jerusalem appears in the second line of stanza 3, where the pilgrims respond by saying:

May peace be within your walls (*be-cheilekh*),

prosperity within your palaces.

The word "*cheil*" appears several times in Scripture together with the word "*choma*,"[[18]](#footnote-18) and so it stands to reason that it is connected to the city wall, and that it too serves the city as a means of protection.[[19]](#footnote-19)

The meaning of the prayer, then, is that peace and prosperity – inward and outward, security and social - should rule in Jerusalem.[[20]](#footnote-20)

**Stanza 4**: Praying for the good of Jerusalem, "for the sake of the house of the Lord," is understandable. The good of Jerusalem, the security and the prosperity that will reign in its midst, guarantee that the house of God will fulfill its role as the center of Divine service, both on ordinary days and on the special occasions when the people of Israel make pilgrimages to the Temple. But the wishing of peace for Jerusalem "for my brothers' and companions' sakes" requires clarification. How does the peace of Jerusalem impact upon the speaker's "brothers and companions"?

Tz.P. Chajes explains the words "for my brothers' and companions' sakes" – "because of my brothers **who reside within it**, so that no enemy should come upon them." This limitation, however, is unconvincing.

Amos Chakham suggests that "'my brothers and my companions' are **all the people of Israel**, whom the love of Jerusalem unites and makes brothers and companions." It is more reasonable, however, that "my brothers and my companions" are the pilgrims, to whom he had previously directed the call, "pray for the peace of Jerusalem." Here again the words of Yirmiyahu cited above clarify our verse: "For in its peace [that of Jerusalem] you shall have peace."

Our psalm gives expression to a similar idea. The peace of Israel depends upon the peace of Jerusalem.[[21]](#footnote-21) Therefore, "For my brothers' and companions' sakes may I now say, ‘Peace be within you.’"

(To be continued.)

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. In "*Zemirot Yisrael*," the book of *Tehillim* with commentary. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Most of the lines in the psalm do not demonstrate parallelism. Incomplete parallelism is found only in verse 5:

   For there they sat on the thrones for judgment,

   the thrones of the house of David.

   And in verse 7:

   May peace be within your walls,

   prosperity within your palaces. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. There is no parallelism between the lines of Stanza 3, but as compensation for the lack of parallelism, there is a repetition of two words: The word "*shalom*" appears in each line as the second word of the first clause, and the root "*shin-lamed-heh*" appears in each line, whether as a verb or as a noun, as the first word of the second clause. Similarly this stanza rhymes: "*ohavayikh*" – "*be-armenotayikh*." [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The parallelism between these two lines is the most developed. It is synonymous, direct, and complete parallelism. And as in the previous stanza, here too there is rhyme: "*bakh*" – "*lakh*." [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A linking connection is appropriate for development between one line and the next, for the latter line opens where the previous line had ended off and develops it. It should be noted that this type of linking is a stylistic feature characteristic of many of the Songs of Ascent, and some have even suggested that the term "Songs of Ascent" reflects this feature. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In his commentary to the book of *Tehillim* in the *Da'at Mikra* series, in his commentary to verses 1-2, in notes 1b-2, and in the conclusion to the psalm. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In section III, we noted that the pilgrimage to Jerusalem of those bringing *bikkurim* (around which the psalm seems to revolve) was a pilgrimage of a large group of people, involving the farmers of an entire district in *Eretz Yisrael*. But since there was no fixed dated for this pilgrimage, it was necessary to tell each farmer that on such-and-such day, "we are going to the house of the Lord," and when he heard this, he was filled with joy. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. a. The advantage of this explanation is that the second exclamation in the verse, "it is like a city that is united together," explains the first exclamation – "Jerusalem that is built." Some commentators explain that the words "that is united together" refer to the unity among the tribes of Israel in that city. According to this, there is no clear connection between the two parts of the verse.

   b. It is difficult for a modern person to understand this praise of Jerusalem. For him, the more "open spaces" that a city has, the grander the city. In ancient times, however, un-built patches within a walled city testified to the poverty of the city's population. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Kenyon reported that in archaeological digs that she had conducted in various areas of the upper city (digs that were conducted prior to the Six Day War), she found no evidence of settlement during the biblical period. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This question may be relevant for dating the composition of our psalm, but from our perspective the issue of dating our psalm is not of such great importance. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The difficulty of such a project lies in the fact that the two parts of the city are separated by a ravine that had to be included within the city walls. In addition, we are dealing with a very long wall which had to be constructed under challenging topographical conditions. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. In three places, the word "*edut*" parallels another term that teaches that this is the sense of the word:

    19:8: "The Torah of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul; the statute (*edut*) of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple."

    78:5: "For He established a statute (*edut*) in Yaakov, and appointed a Torah in Israel."

    81:5-6: "For this is a statute for Israel, an ordinance of the God of Yaakov. This He ordained in Yosef for a statute (*edut*)."

    In one place, the context teaches that this is the sense of the word:

    119:88: "In Your steadfast love spare my life; so I shall keep the statute (*edut*) of Your mouth." [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. In all these places, the word appears in this sense in the plural, except for *Tehillim* 132:12: "If your children will keep My covenant and My statute (*ve-edoti*) that I shall teach them." The Ibn Ezra (ad loc.) writes: "The *cholam* comes in place of a *shuruk*," and thus this word joins the instances in which the word *edut* is used in the sense of statute listed in the previous note. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Rashi and the Meiri imply that we are dealing with two different institutions; the Radak and R. Yeshaya understand that we are dealing with the thrones of the house of David which are the thrones of judgment. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Shmuel* II 12:1-6; ibid. 14:4-10; ibid. 15:2-6; *Melakhim* I 3:16-27; all these places refer to David or Shlomo sitting in judgment of the people (although in two of the cases, the judgment is fictional).

    In two places in the book of *Yeshayahu* (9:6; 16:5) and in one place in the book of *Yirmiyahu* (21:12), the house of David is mentioned in connection with the execution of judgment. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Rashi connects the two clauses of the verse by way of the words, "and say to it;" the Ibn Ezra connects them by way of the words, "and they will pray, saying before it;" and the Meiri by way of the words, "and they will say to it in the manner of prayer." [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. In our study of psalm 137, end of section IV, we cited the words of R. Reuven Margaliyot that the city about which Yirmiyah speaks in his words to the exiles is Jerusalem, and not Bavel. By doubling the letter *mem*, he understands the words, "*asher higleti etkhem shama*," as "*asher higleti etkhem mi-shama*," "from which I have caused you to be carried away captives," i.e., Jerusalem. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *Shmuel* II 20:15; *Yeshayahu* 26:1; *Nachum* 3:8; *Eikha* 2:8. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Various suggestions have been made regarding the precise identification of the "*chel*." Some say that it is a moat before the wall, while others say it is the sloped lower portion of the wall. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. The connection between Jerusalem's wall and its palaces appears in one other place in the book of *Tehillim*, in psalm 48, which is also dedicated to the glory of Jerusalem. There it says (v. 14), "Mark well her wall, consider her palaces." [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. This dependency might be on the earthly, rational plane, but it is possible that it is concealed from the eye, not dependent upon political or economic factors. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)