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ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**SEFER TEHILLIM**

**Lecture 20: "*NAFSHI*" AND "*ANI*"  
PSALM 131 ACCORDING TO A.L. STRAUSS (PART I)**

**Rav Elchanan Samet**

**I. ABOUT THE POET AND MAN OF LETTERS, ARYEH LUDWIG STRAUSS**

The study of Psalm 131 presented here is based entirely on the literary analysis of Aryeh Ludwig Strauss, *z"l.* The importance of Strauss's work with respect to the book of *Tehilim* goes well beyond the analysis of any particular psalm, and it is difficult to exaggerate its influence on the method underlying these studies. Since Strauss is a relatively unknown figure, I wish to briefly introduce the man, his life, and his contribution to the understanding of the book of *Tehilim.*[[1]](#footnote-1)

Aryeh Ludwig Strauss was born in 1892 in the city of Aachen, Germany, into a family that engaged in commerce. At an early age, he abandoned the business life and devoted himself to literary matters.

During this period, the beginning of the twentieth century, a movement of return to Jewish culture and values began to arise within the assimilated German Jewish community. These stirrings did not skip over the young Strauss; already in his youth he studied Hebrew, and, in his twenties, became a Zionist, to no small extent under the influence of Martin Buber. Buber, one of the primary leaders of the Jewish-Zionist awakening in Germany, influenced Strauss in many areas. Strauss eventually married Buber’s daughter.

At the same time that Strauss was drawing closer to the Hebrew language, to Jewish tradition, to Jewish nationalism, and to popular Yiddish culture, he also turned from an atheist to a believer, and he began to observe some Jewish traditions. To complete the picture, mention should be made of Strauss's socialist outlook.

Already before World War I (in which Strauss fought as a soldier in the German army, and was even wounded, despite the fact that he was a pacifist), Strauss published poems and articles in the German language. His articles dealt with literary matters, Judaism, socialism and, in the end, with Zionism as well.

After the war, at the beginning of the 1920's, Strauss began to translate Yiddish poetry into Hebrew. Over the next decade, his literary activity was split between writing German poetry and studying German literature, on the one hand, and occupation with Jewish culture, on the other – writing articles, translating from Yiddish and Hebrew, and editing books that were meant to fill German Jewry's thirst for Jewish literature in the German language.

After two previous visits to Eretz Israel (in 1924 and in 1934), Strauss immigrated to Eretz Israel in the winter of 1935. His visit to the country and his enthusiastic encounter with its scenery gave rise to his first Hebrew poem, "*El ha-Mifratz*" (1934). In a short account of the inner struggles that eventually gave birth to this poem, Strauss describes the paradoxical process in which he translated his poem from Hebrew into German.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Even after settling in Eretz Israel, Strauss continued to write poetry in German (even though the subject matter of his poetry was related to Eretz Israel and his volume of poetry that was published in Germany in 1935 was even called "Land Israel"). Slowly, however, he began to write poetry in Hebrew. As he became more deeply rooted in Eretz Israel, and as he gained greater mastery of the Hebrew language, his Hebrew poetry began to flow more easily; he was then in his late forties. Most of his Hebrew poems were collected in the volume, "*Sha'ot ve-Dor*" (Mossad Bialik 1951).

This "miracle" of being able to begin writing poetry at a relatively advanced age, in a language that is not one's mother tongue, is described by Strauss in the account mentioned above (see note 2): "By the time I wrote my third poem in the fall of 1940, I had gained fluency in the Hebrew language, fluency that was encouraged and assisted by the master poets of medieval Spain, headed by Shmuel ha-Naggid and Yehuda ha-Levi."[[3]](#footnote-3)

Upon his arrival in Eretz Israel, Strauss joined kibbutz Hazore'a, and several years later he began to teach in the Ben Shemen youth village, which at the time was absorbing young immigrants from Germany arriving through Youth Aliya.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In 1944, with the arrival of large numbers of refugee youths in the Youth Aliya institutions, it was deemed necessary that teachers and counselors be trained to assist in their absorption. A framework for the speedy training of teachers and counselors was established in Jerusalem – the Youth Aliya Counselors Seminary. This institution conducted six-month courses, training many teachers in two programs, one for religious teachers and one for non-religious teachers. Nathan Rottenstreich, who headed the general program, invited Strauss to teach in the seminary. Strauss accepted the offer and moved to Jerusalem.

Strauss's teaching in the seminary already touches upon his approach to the book of *Tehilim* in general and to psalm 131 in particular, and I shall expand upon this in the next section.

Strauss was later invited to lecture in the literature department of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and it was he who established its department of comparative literature. His students in those years include some of the most important poets, writers, and teachers of literature in Israel (Leah Goldberg, Dan Pagis, Haim Gouri, Nathan Zach, Tuvya Ribner, and others).

Aryeh Ludwig Strauss died in 1953, at the height of his literary career, both in terms of writing and teaching. His primary literary heritage was written in German; his writings in that language – poetry, prose, plays, essays and scholarly articles – were collected in two large volumes that were published in Germany in recent years. Very little of his diversified literary heritage was published in Hebrew: only a small amount in his later years and a little bit more after his death.[[5]](#footnote-5)

### II. A.L. Strauss's revolutionary approach to the study of *Tehilim*

Let us go back to the period during which A.L. Strauss taught in the Counselors Seminary in Jerusalem in 1944, where he first became known to the broad, diversified and adult public as a gifted teacher and exemplary personality. Strauss had originally been invited to teach literature, but since there was nobody available to teach Scripture, he was also asked to teach Tanakh. "I am not a Bible teacher," argued Strauss, but, bowing to necessity, he accepted the position. As a poet and literary analyst, he decided to teach the book of *Tehilim*. His *Tehilim* classes were given both in the program for religious teachers and in the general program, and for many years they remained inscribed in the memories of his students as an uplifting experience.

The following information was reported to me by Nechama Leibowitz, *a"h*, who also taught at that seminary (she taught Rashi's commentary to the Torah).

I participated in the class that he gave on Psalm 23, and he illuminated the psalm in an entirely new light. “Aryeh,” I said to him after class, “I recite this psalm every Shabbat, and never did I see in it what you have uncovered![[6]](#footnote-6)” “I don't know,” Strauss responded modestly, “I read the psalm aloud once or twice,[[7]](#footnote-7) and then I read it over quietly a few more times, and whatever comes to my mind over the course of these repeated readings – that is what I teach."

The Youth Aliya Department of the Jewish Agency eventually decided to publish some of the lectures given in the seminary along with other works written by scholars in various fields, in a series of pamphlets, entitled "*Iyunim la-Madrikh ve-laMoreh*" ("Studies for the Counselor and the Teacher"). The first pamphlet in this series (out of dozens of pamphlets that were ultimately published) was "*Al Shelosha Mizmorim mi-Sefer Tehilim*" ("Three Psalms in the Book of *Tehilim*")by Aryeh Ludwig Strauss.[[8]](#footnote-8) Strauss wrote this pamphlet based on the lectures that he gave in the seminary. It is comprised of 24 small pages in which he analyzes Psalms 23, 114 and 131. It was published in 5711 (1951).

A year later Strauss published another article in the literary journal "*Bechinot*" (no. 1, 5712), in which he analyzes another psalm – no. 124.

During the period of his final illness in 1953, Strauss dictated his analysis of yet another psalm – Psalm 12 – to his student Nechama Leibowitz. She read it at a symposium held in Strauss's memory in 1954, and it was published in "*Nefesh ve-Shir*" (*Iyyunim* 19-20) later that year (see end of note 5).

All of these articles on the book of *Tehilim* were republished in Strauss's posthumously published volume, "*Be-Darkhei ha-Sifrut*" (see note 5, item 3), pp. 66-94).

A spiritual-intellectual upheaval can take place without being noticed, "by chance," and even without its initiator or those surrounding him being aware of what is happening. Such was the upheaval caused by Aryeh Ludwig Strauss in his lectures on the book of *Tehilim* in the middle of the 1940's, and in the publication of the small pamphlet, "*Al Shelosha Mizmorim mi-Sefer Tehilim*," at the beginning of the 1950's.

Explanations like those that he gave to the psalms of *Tehilim –* profound literary analyses, in which he utilized all the modes of understanding poetry available to a poet and literary critic – had never before been offered, at least not in the Hebrew language.

What were the most prevalent approaches to the understanding of the book of *Tehilim* until then? Traditional exegesis focused primarily on the explanation of obscure words and the resolution of grammatical difficulties in isolated verses. In more recent generations, short paraphrases were also given to summarize the gist of the psalm.

Modern Bible criticism undertook several tasks in addition to offering a literal explanation of the biblical text. It proposed various types of textual emendations to reconcile difficulties in the psalm; it dealt extensively with the task of dating the psalm, generally by way of baseless speculations, with the rule being the later the better; it dealt with strange speculations about the role of the psalms in the Temple service, also with no real foundation; it sorted the psalms into different genres based on their form and content; it divided each psalm into sections, thinking that with this it fulfilled its obligation regarding study of the psalm's structure; and finally, it engaged in an esthetic and conceptual assessment of the psalms, each psalm receiving a "grade" in the eyes of the critic.

There is only one thing that never entered the commentators' minds: to see the psalm as it is – as a poem, and to apply to it the analytical methods of literary theory that are used today to understand poetry. Surely this is the most elementary thing that begs to be done when approaching works of poetry, even if they are ancient and suffused with the awe of sanctity of many generations.

To be sure, the classical commentators did not deal with literary theory either, nor were they even aware of its existence. But why didn't the modern commentators, living in the first half of the twentieth century, think of using such an approach with respect to the psalms of *Tehilim*? There is a twofold answer to this question: First of all, these commentators were by and large not trained in the field of literature. Secondly, biblical criticism, as it had developed over the course of more than a century, influenced everyone in the field of Tanakh and misdirected them away from the right questions, and certainly the right answers. Moreover, some of the fundamental assumptions of biblical criticism negated, *a priori*, any justification for literary analysis.

In order to liberate the field of biblical scholarship from these deficiencies, it was necessary for a man steeped in literature and fully proficient in the methodology of poetic analysis to explain and teach the psalms of *Tehilim* in the same way that he would explain and teach the classics of Hebrew and universal poetry: out of deep esteem and love for that poetry. This is precisely what A.L. Strauss did, simply because he didn't know how to do anything else, when it fell upon him to teach Tanakh to teachers and counselors from all across the country, as they rapidly trained to help in the absorption of the Jewish youth streaming into the country during the years of the Holocaust.

This is what Strauss writes in his "Introductory Notes" that precede his analysis of the three psalms:

The analysis of the following three poems is an attempt to evaluate biblical poems in the way that any other poem would be evaluated. I am well aware that the historical and religious essence of these poems, which are chapters of the Holy Writ, goes beyond the mere human-aesthetic understanding. It never entered my mind to challenge the alternative understanding, which appreciates that aspect of biblical poetry, and necessitates the question: What is the role of the poem in the great edifice of Israel's Torah, its life and holy service. This is indeed an important question, but it does not negate the importance of the question that we are asking: What is the poem in itself? What is its human core and what is its artistic structure? What is the relationship between the idea and the image that comprises the poem's linguistic body?

Strauss's words betray an apologetic tone, directed at those maintaining a traditional religious approach to the book of *Tehilim*. He feels the need to justify his literary approach and to explain its legitimacy alongside the traditional approach. It seems to me, however, that this defensive attitude is unnecessary, and that the distinction that Strauss makes between his own literary approach and the traditional approach is incorrect. It is precisely someone who asks "What is the role of the poem in the great edifice of Israel's Torah and life" who must reach a deeper understanding and internalization of the psalm. To that end, he must use the best methods available today for the understanding of poetry, namely, literary theory and the methodology of literary analysis.

The principle taught us by *Chazal* that "the Torah speaks in the language of man"[[9]](#footnote-9) applies not only to the basic linguistic-literal level of the words of Tanakh, but also to the way that they are fashioned into whole literary units, e.g., a biblical narrative or poem. Accordingly, the analytical methods developed in recent generations to understand human literary creations are appropriate and essential for the understanding of the biblical story or poem. Moreover, it is incumbent upon the Torah student coming to study biblical poetry to take advantage of the intellectual achievements and serious attitude of literary theory regarding great poetry, which for him is holy poetry. The fact that the methodology of literary analysis developed out of the study of medieval poetry, or secular poetry of various kinds, does not invalidate this methodology from being used also in the study of the psalms of *Tehilim*. On the contrary, "Let not the priest's daughter [= the poetry of *Tehilim*] be like an innkeeper [= regular poetry]."[[10]](#footnote-10)

In the decades that have passed since Strauss's death, the literary approach to the study of Scripture has become a central approach in biblical study (though with respect to biblical scholars who are not scholars of literature, intermingled among their literary analyses are elements of criticism, though they seem to be unaware that the two approaches do not mix). Strauss had heirs, both in the world of literary theory and in the world of biblical studies, and their work is immeasurably broader and more sophisticated than Strauss's pioneering articles.

Nevertheless, Strauss will be remembered as being the first to teach us (at least in the Hebrew language) how to approach the study of *Tehilim* seriously, profoundly, and using the methodology of literary analysis. Furthermore, many have attained important achievements in the study of Tanakh by following the path paved by Strauss, but none have been graced with that nobility of spirit, that poetic spirit, that human simplicity, that characterize the analyses of the psalms of *Tehilim* by A.L. Strauss – that unique Jewish poet, who moved about the temples of world literature with total familiarity, but owing to historical-spiritual circumstances, returned to his homeland, his language and his roots.

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To complete this section, and before we begin the actual study of psalm 131, I wish to cite Strauss's last comment in the "Introductory Notes" that preface his analysis of the three psalms:

I have applied the term "stanza" to any rhythmic unit that is comprised of more than one line – usually a pair of parallel lines, but sometimes three of four lines, which constitute a defined rhythmic picture. The numbers (1, 2, etc.) refer to the stanzas, and not to the traditional division into verses.

Even this "technical" comment contains an innovation, to which the readers of my studies have certainly become accustomed: The psalms of *Tehilim* must be written in the form that poetry is written in our time, in short lines, and divided into stanzas. This manner of writing is an essential foundation for any literary analysis that will follow.

(To be continued.)

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. My comments are based on Yedidya Peles's "Afterword" to Strauss's (translated) collection of essays, "*Ha-Adam ve-ha-Shira*" (in the series: *Ta'amim* – *Mivchar Kitvei Mofet be-Estetika*, Ha-Kibbutz ha-Me'uchad ve-Sifriyat ha-Po'alim, 1985); on an oral conversation that I had with Nechama Leibowitz, *z"l*, one of Strauss's students; on Strauss's writings that have been published in Hebrew; and on other sources. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. "*Al Chibbur Shiri ha-Ivri ha-Rishon – 'El ha-Mifratz'" –* in: *Ha-Adam ve-ha-Shira*, pp. 115-119, translated by Yedidya Peles. Several of Strauss's poems were written in two languages, Hebrew and German, and the saying for this collection of poems that Strauss wrote for himself was: "Where is the language to express all that is within me? My two languages (*safotai*)are the two lips (*sefatav*) of my heart." [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The influence of the poetry of medieval Spain is, indeed, evident in Strauss's poetry; see, for example, "*Ha-Yona*" (*Sha'ot ve-Dor*, p. 72) or "*Shir ha-Shirim*" (ibid., p. 58). His writing in this style appears at times anachronistic, but this did not deter Strauss. His attitude toward one of Rabbi Yehuda Halevi's poems is brought in the next note. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. It is worthwhile to cite a passage from the memoirs of one of Strauss's students in those years, Ada Brodski, that was published in the literary supplement of *Ha’aretz* (August 22, 2003) to mark the fiftieth anniversary of his death:

   "On one of my visits to Ben-Shemen, about two years after I left the village, I found him in the reading room, very excited with his eyes shining. He signaled to me that I should approach him, he asked me to sit down next to him, and he showed me a short poem written by Yehuda Halevi that for days had not ceased to occupy him and fill him with happiness. When I got up to leave after a full hour of immersion in the five lines in question, they were engraved on my heart never to be erased, engraved so deeply that I dare to cite them here from memory, without having to worry about excessive mistakes:

   "… Add pain, I will add love, for my love for you is more wonderful to me."

   I will always see this hour of grace in the company of Ludwig Strauss and Yehuda Halevi, in that bright room among books and readers, as one of the most grace-filled hours of my life. Ludwig's face radiated light; when he opened a Bible in order to show me the source of that marvelous expression, "and I seized the corner of his friendship," in the book of *Shmuel*, he looked like someone who had discovered a lost continent. When he read in a low voice, as is fitting in a library, he detached the *"li*" [suffix] at the end of each line from the core word, giving it refined and independent existence… that he so loved.

   "… Add pain, I will add love, for my love for you is more wonderful – to me (*li*)."

   "'*Ahavatekha*,' 'your love,' [mentioned in the poem]" he explained, "is the love with which I love you, for from your side nothing reaches me but pain. But even were you to return love to me, I would draw my main happiness from being a lover, and not from being a loved one. The love that was 'more wonderful' to David than the love of women was the love that he had for Yehonatan; his being loved by his beloved belonged to a different category"…. Ludwig was once again stooped over the poem, and in contemplative silence he read the line another time. This time he delayed the closing "*li*" for such a long time, that it seemed to me that he wished to swallow it up entirely: "Add pain, I will add love, for my love for you is more wonderful – to me." [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The list below does not include what Strauss published in the Hebrew press in Eretz Israel (primarily in *Al ha-Mishmar*) and was not included in one of his later publications:

   *Sha'ot ve-Dor – Shirim*, Mossad Bialik 1951.

   *Al Shelosha Mizmorim mi-Sefer Tehilim* – no. 1 in the series, "*Iyyunim le-Madrikh u-le-Moreh*," Youth Aliya Department of the Jewish Agency, 5711 (regarding this booklet see below section II of our study).

   *Be-Darkhei ha-Sifrut* – *Iyyunim be-Sifrut Yisrael u-be-Sifrut ha-Amim*, ed. Tuvya Ribner, Mossad Bialik 1959. This book, the longest of all of Strauss's Hebrew publications, was published posthumously, and it includes several chapters written by the author himself, several chapters based on the notes of his students, some translations of his German work, and two chapters dictated verbatim during his final illness and faithfully recorded by Nechama Leibowitz.

   *Ma'amarot –* a collection of aphorisms translated by Tuvya Ribner from Strauss's book in German, *Mizra Choref* (Zurich, 1953), Sifriyat ha-Po'alim, 1984.

   *Ha-Adam ve-ha-Shira*, *Perakim mitokh Mishnato ha-Po'etit shel Strauss*, translated by Yedidya Peles and Tuvya Ribner, in the series: *Ta'amim - Mivchar Kitvei Mofet be-Estetika*, Ha-Kibbutz ha-Me'uchad ve-Sifriyat ha-Po'alim, 1985.

   About a year after Strauss's death, on Adar 7-8, 5714, the participants in his seminar for Youth Aliya counselors conducted a two day memorial seminar, in which several of his friends and students delivered lectures in his memory. These lectures were collected in *Iyyunim* 19-20, Jerusalem, 5714. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. It is, of course, possible, that it is precisely the frequent reading of this psalm every Shabbat that interferes with seeing what lays concealed in this psalm and in other psalms familiar to us from earliest childhood. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Strauss attached great importance to prosody – the music of poetry. He wrote on the topic and lectured about it in the university. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In the 1950's and 1960's, the *Iyyunim* booklets were found in many homes in Israel, including the home of my parents, and it was there that I first become acquainted with Strauss's work. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Berakhot* 31b *et al.* [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The source of this saying is in the last mishna in tractate *Yebamot*, and there the reference is to a real innkeeper. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)