

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

SEFER TEHILLIM

Shiur #04: Psalm 130 (Part 3)
By Rav Elchanan Samet

H. Third stanza

Why does the psalmist now suddenly start speaking **about** God, in the third person? And how does stanza c. continue the ideas expressed previously?

In order to answer these questions, we need to clarify what it is that the worshipper is “waiting” and “hoping” for. “*Kiviti hashem*” means “I wait for God,” as further on in this stanza, “my soul (waits) for God” (*la-donay*). However, the absence of the ‘*lammed*’ indicates that the waiting is for God Himself, i.e., for His revelation.

In the second line, the worshipper declares, “for His word I hope.” What is this word? Considering what has already been said in the previous stanzas, the answer seems clear: the word that the psalmist longs to hear is God’s declaration, “*salachti*” (I have forgiven). However, he is not content for God’s word to reach him in some indirect manner; what he wants is for God Himself to appear on the horizon of his life, with His direct, redeeming word – “*salachti*.”

Now we can understand why the psalmist is speaking of God in the third person. It is appropriate by virtue of the content of this stanza: if a person is anxiously awaiting God’s appearance, waiting to hear His word, then until this happens God is “hidden” from him. Continuing to address God in the second person, as in the previous stanzas, would contradict the very message that this stanza is trying to convey!

“*Nafshi la-Adoshem*” means “My soul hopes and waits for God.” This interpretation is supported by the preceding two lines, and especially the first line, where the psalmist declares, “my soul waits.”

Now we arrive at the puzzling repetition, “*mi-shomrim la-boker, shomrim la-boker*.” Of all the interpretations that have been proposed, the one that seems most appropriate is that of Prof. Y. Blau, cited by Amos Chakham in his Da’at Mikra commentary on our verse (p. 480, n. 7):

To Y. Blau’s view, the first ‘shomrim’ is meant as a noun, and the second – as a verb. What the verse means is, “My hope in God is stronger than

the hope of the (night) watchmen (*shomrim*) for the morning, as they await (*shomrim*) the coming of the morning.

The first occurrence, then, refers to the night-watchmen who are guarding the city until dawn. The verb “sh-m-r” is interpreted to mean anticipation or waiting by Rashi in his commentary on Bereishit 37:11:

“But his father waited with (*shamar et*) the matter” – meaning, “he waited in anticipation to see when it would happen.” Likewise (Yishayahu 26:2), anticipates faith” (*shomer emunim*), and (Iyov 14:16), “Do you not await (*tishmor*) my sin.”

Why does the psalmist specifically choose night watchmen¹ – a fairly uncommon profession – to illustrate the anticipation of the end of their work, with the dawn?

A model of a person working regular hours is presented in *Tehillim* 104:23, “Man goes out to his work and to his labor until evening” – i.e., he works all day. Hence, he anticipates the coming of evening; it is then that he will rest, and if he is day-laborer, he will also receive his wages (*Devarim* 24:15). Indeed, Iyov describes the laborer’s anticipation of the evening:

Has a man not hard service upon the earth,
And are his days not like the days of a hired laborer?
As the servant awaits the shadow, and as a hired laborer waits for (the wages of) his work.... (*Iyov* 7:1-2)

Why, then, does the psalmist choose to depict night watchmen?

A laborer’s anticipation, throughout the day, for the arrival of evening is a normal, common matter. It is quite unlike the night-watchman’s anticipation of the dawn. The night-watchman carries out his job while he is surrounded by darkness and uncertainty, with a great responsibility resting on his shoulders. Guard duty at night is a job performed during hours when a person is tired, and it is accompanied by anxiety and a tense anticipation of the dawn, which brings daylight and confidence, and delivers the watchman from his stressful job.²

¹ Night watchmen are mentioned in a few places in Tanakh. In *Yishayahu* 21:11 we find, “Watchman – what of the night?”; in 62:6 – “I have set watchmen upon your walls”. There are two appearances in *Shir Ha-shirim*: we find – “The watchmen who walk about the city found me” (3:3) - and this comes just after the woman has arisen from her bed in the night (*ibid.*, verse 1). Similarly, also 5:7. The same image is borrowed to describe God in *Tehillim* 121:4 – “Behold, the guardian of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps”.

² Anyone who has actually performed guard duty at night, at a time and place of increased security tension, in the dark and with fog greatly limiting one’s vision, will have no trouble understanding the image of the anticipation of the night-watchmen for the morning.

The comparison that is drawn here between the psalmist's hope for God's appearance and the anticipation of the night-watchmen for the dawn, teaches us several things:

- While waiting and hoping for God he is as emotionally stressed and insecure as the night watchmen.
- God is "hidden" from him, leaving him "in the dark."
- His hoping for God's appearance is accompanied by great stress, and he counts the minutes until it is over.
- God's appearance and His word are like the dawn that comes after a dark night.
- The worshipper would like to believe that God's appearance is as assured and certain as is the dawn.

All of this rich evocation of his hope in God and his anticipation of His word is expressed in four words, which are actually two words that are repeated: "*mi-shomrim la-boker shomrim la-boker*." All that the night-watchmen experience and feel is brought to life – and made even more vivid and powerful simply by means of the prefixed letter "*mem*" (*mi-shomrim*) – "**more than** those who watch...."

In the space of twelve Hebrew words, of which four are really two that are repeated, this third stanza expresses the anticipation of God's appearance in perhaps the most powerful form in all of the Tanakh.

I. The fourth stanza

If in the preceding stanza the psalmist compared his waiting for God's word to the anticipation of the dawn on the part of the night watchmen, thereby alluding to the distress and suffering involved in this hope, in the fourth stanza any allusion to darkness and suffering is banished. Here, the waiting for God is accompanied by an awareness that "with God is kindness, and great redemption is with Him." This being the case, His **positive** response to man's appeal is assured and certain.

What are the kindness and redemption that are "with" God? The kindness, obviously, refers to the kindness of forgiveness ("for with You is forgiveness"), and "redemption" refers to His redeeming man from his sins, as we read in the conclusion of the psalm: "And He will redeem Israel from all of their sins."

What has brought about this change of atmosphere? The answer to this question will become clear after we discuss another important matter pertaining to the fourth stanza.

The command to Israel, at the beginning of this stanza ("Israel – hope in God!") comes as a surprise. The first three stanzas of this psalm are stamped with the individual personality who stands before God, waiting and hoping for

Him. Why does the psalmist now set aside this intimate atmosphere in favor of an appeal to Israel? And where has Israel even been mentioned thus far?

We detected a somewhat similar phenomenon earlier on in the first half of the psalm, in the transition between the first and the second stanzas: the first stanza is characterized by personal, intimate experience, while in the second stanza the “I” of the speaker retreats, making no further reference to himself in the first person. This is the result of the worshipper having brought to mind a general truth which applies not only to him personally, but to God’s relationship with all of mankind, including himself. This general truth eases the distress that was voiced in the first stanza.

In the third stanza, the worshipper is deeply and intensively hoping for God’s appearance and awaiting His word. Is God’s appearance a certainty? Will the worshipper hear God’s word, “*salachti*”? He would like to believe so, but it would seem that it is not so certain; hence the hints of distress and suffering in this stanza.

At this point the worshipper reminds himself that what applies to him personally is not the same as what applies to Israel as a nation. With regard to the nation, there is no doubt as to God’s positive response, bestowing His kindness of forgiveness and redemption from sins.

Hence the appeal to Israel at the beginning of the fourth stanza: “Israel – have hope in the Lord” – as I have hope in Him. But your help, Israel, will certainly be granted a positive response, because with regard to you collectively, “With God is kindness, and great redemption is with Him.”

From this point forward, the individual worshipper is included amongst all of Israel, and his own waiting and hoping becomes part of theirs. His confidence in God’s response to them now includes himself; hence the change in atmosphere in this stanza.

One of Rav Soloveitchik’s essays on *teshuva* – “The Individual and the Community” – addresses precisely this point: the difference between the individual and the collective when it comes to atonement for sins and God’s positive response to man who stands before Him.³ To quote just a few lines from this complex and wonderful essay:⁴

³ *On Repentance*, pp. 107-137 (67-98 in the Hebrew).

⁴ In the section just prior to this (starting on p. 127 [p. 87 in the Hebrew]), Rav Soloveitchik demonstrates that our prayer service for Yom Kippur includes two forms of *vidui* (confession) which are very different from one another: the one is recited by the individual in a whisper, in submission, and abject misery; the other is recited by the community, during the repetition of the *Amida*, in an uplifted mood and with complete confidence that God will accept this *teshuva*.

“The difference between individual and communal confession is tremendous. When the individual confesses he does so from a state of insecurity, depression and despair in the wake of sin. For what assurance has he that he will be acquitted of his sins? ... In contrast, *Knesset Israel*... confesses out of a sense of confidence and even rejoicing for it does so in the presence of a loyal ally, before its most beloved one.”⁵

J. Conclusion of the psalm

It is very important to note that the intense hope for God’s appearance and for His redemptive word is not fulfilled within the body of the psalm; it remains open. This in no way implies that God’s response is not assured. After the fourth stanza it is certain, but nevertheless it is not described within the body of the psalm. This is not a deficiency, but rather integral to the psalmist’s intention.

There were periods of Jewish history when the hope for God’s word, uttering “*salachti*,” was answered with an explicit prophecy declaring, “I have forgiven as you have spoken.” There were other periods, when prophecy had already ceased and a crimson thread served the purpose of expressing God’s direct response to Israel, albeit in a silent and indirect way.⁶ For most of our history, however, neither the nation as a whole nor individuals received a response in the form of prophecy or through the evidence of the crimson thread. Throughout this time, there was no dimming of the hope in the heart of either the individual or the Jewish people as a whole for the appearance of God and the sound of His word. Along with this hope there was a certainty that God would respond positively to the hope and waiting of Israel, and of each individual comprising the nation. However, we have not merited a clear and explicit response. Our psalm therefore gives expression to the experience of these many generations.⁷

The conclusion of the psalm, at verse 8, is meant to alleviate somewhat the sense of deficiency that arises from the body of the psalm with regard to God’s response. It is difficult, as it were, to come to terms with the psalmist’s call to Israel, in stanza four, which remains suspended in the air. The reader asks himself, “Did God’s kindness appear to Israel? Did He redeem them from their sins?”

⁵ The excerpt is from p. 131 (91 Heb.). Rav Soloveitchik goes on to say, “In fact, in certain Jewish communities (I myself heard this in Germany) it is customary for the whole congregation to sing the *al chet* confession in heart-warming melodies.”

⁶ Yoma 39a teaches that up until the time of Shimon ha-Tzaddik, the crimson thread would always turn white, whereas from his time onwards it would sometimes turn white and at other times remain unchanged. For forty years before the destruction of the Temple, the crimson thread failed to turn white.

⁷ Obviously, this is not meant as any sort of “dating” of the psalm. The psalms were all written not only for their own time, but also for future generations. In any event, the question of dating the psalms is not an important issue and we shall generally not be addressing it.

Had the psalm included another stanza, providing a **description** of God's response, as something happening in the present – as the psalm is being uttered – then the special purpose of our psalm, as described above, would be damaged. The conclusion is a sort of compromise: there is no description of God's actual response, but it is promised for the future: "He **will redeem** Israel from all of their sins."

This distancing of the conclusion from the body of the psalm, in terms of the redemption that God will bring to Israel, is also a distancing from the body of the speaker, the psalmist: it is no longer the speaker whose words have been issuing throughout the psalm, since that speaker had addressed Israel in the second person: "Israel, have hope..."! In the conclusion, the psalmist is a sort of narrator, who speaks about Israel in the third person, and whose task is to finish off what the worshipper did not say – what could not have been said: that the certainty expressed by the worshipper in the fourth stanza, as to God's positive response to Israel, is indeed going to happen.

(to be continued)

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