

SEFER TEHILLIM

**Shiur #05: Psalm 130 (Part 4)
By Rav Elchanan Samet**

K. Structure of the psalm – comparing the two halves

Thus far we have discussed the different stanzas comprising the psalm, each addressing the same (internal) event, and the way in which each stanza continues the previous one. We may now ask whether the psalm as a whole is structured in such a way as to convey a layer of meaning that our analysis of each stanza has not yet apprehended.

In section E. of this study, I elaborated on the distinction between the two equal halves of the psalm: in the first half (first and second stanzas) the worshipper addresses God in the second person, while in the second half (third and fourth stanzas) he speaks about Him in the third person. We discussed the reason for this transition in section H., which focused on the third stanza. We also noted, in section E., that the clear division of a unit of biblical text into two halves encourages the reader to look at the two halves in parallel, as this provides an overall picture of the structure of the unit and its main message.

What sort of relationship do the two halves of our psalm bear to one another? Unquestionably, we are faced with a direct parallel, where the first stanza corresponds to the third, and the second to the fourth. Let us once again review the psalm as a whole, this time emphasizing not only its poetical quality (as we did in section c.), but also the structure – i.e., the parallels between its stanzas and its two component halves. On the basis of this visual parallel we will then go on to discuss the details:¹

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| A song of ascents | |
| a. From the depths I cry out to you, O God. My Lord, hear my voice Let Your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications. | c. I wait for the Lord; my soul waits and for His word I hope. My soul (waits) for my God (more) than those who watch for morning (more than) watch for morning. |
| b. If You were to mark sins, Lord, My God – who could stand? | d. Israel – have hope in the Lord, for with God is kindness |

¹ There will be some repetition of points that have been noted already, but the overall review will serve to present these points in a new perspective.

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| But with You is forgiveness In order that You may be feared. | and great redemption is with Him. |
| And He will redeem Israel from all of their sins. | |

First and third stanzas:

The parallel between the first and third stanzas is essentially one of content:² both express an intense hope for a connection between the worshipper and God, and in both cases this hope arises from the distress in which the worshipper finds himself. In the first stanza this distress is expressed in the metaphor of “the depths,” while in the third stanza it takes the form of the night-watchmen who are anxiously awaiting the dawn.

Despite the similarity of content, however, each stanza is the opposite of the other in terms of the sort of connection between man and God that is being sought. In the first stanza, the direction of the desired relationship is bottom-up: man voices his supplication and asks that God hear his desperate **call** from the depths. In the third stanza, the worshipper seeks the opposite, “top down” connection. Man waits and hopes for God’s word (His **response**) and for His appearance in his gloomy reality. God’s appearance is as eagerly awaited by the worshipper as is the dawn by the night-watchmen.

There is therefore a progression from one stanza to the other: The worshipper who awaits God’s word (in the third stanza) assumes that his own “word” – his call from the depths (in the first stanza) has been heard; he now awaits God’s answer.

This change and progression have been achieved by virtue of the worshipper’s realization in the second stanza: that God forgives man and does not preserve his sins. Now, fortified with the sense that God has heard his cry from the depths, the worshipper awaits His response; His word – “*salachtī*” (I have forgiven).

The essential difference between the first stanza and the third, in terms of the direction of the relationship, also explains why in the first stanza the appeal to God is in the second person. This is characteristic of a person who is in deep distress, oppressed by a sense of God “hiding His face.”³ In the third stanza, describing the tense anticipation of God’s appearance and of His word, God becomes a “third person” (in Hebrew, literally, “*nistar*” – hidden). The worshipper is no longer appealing **to Him**; he speaks **of Him** and of his hope for God’s appearance.⁴

2 It is important also to point out one linguistic parallel: in these two stanzas, and only in these, God’s Name (Y-H-V-H) appears in full (in the first line) and then is exchanged with “*A-donay*.” In the other two stanzas both Names appear, but with changes in relation to the model set forth here.

3 I commented on this in the context of the discussion of psalm 27; see section b. of this study and note 4 ad loc.

4 There is a sort of paradox here: the appeal to God in the second person is actually expressing a sense of distance and of the ‘hiding of God’s face,’ while in the more tranquil

Second and fourth stanzas

These stanzas share both a thematic and a stylistic parallel. The unusual expression, “with You is forgiveness,” in the second stanza, reappears twice in the fourth stanza, with similar wording: “For **with God is kindness** and much **redemption is with Him**.” This parallel is instructive as to the nature of the kindness that the worshipper and all of Israel are hoping for: the kindness of forgiveness, while the “redemption” referred to here is redemption from sin (as indicated in verse 8). Nevertheless, there is a progression between the second stanza and the fourth: the words “kindness” and “redemption” carry a more positive load and have a broader meaning than what can be attributed to the word “forgiveness.”

A further – hidden – parallel between these two stanzas is the fact that the worshipper does not speak about himself, in the first person, as he does in the first and third stanzas. Nevertheless, the voice we hear obviously remains that of the worshipper himself. We know this from his appeal, in these stanzas, to another party: in the second stanza – to God; in the fourth stanza – to Israel.

What causes the worshipper to desist from talking about himself in these two stanzas? We come back to the same reasons: these two stanzas are meant to ease the distress in which the worshipper is mired. How does he reassure himself in these two stanzas? In the second and fourth stanzas, the worshipper emerges beyond himself, to a wider world, and thinks about some general truths pertaining to that world. This perspective is reflected in the fact that he no longer speaks about himself.

In the second stanza, his distress is relieved when he thinks about how God treats man in general: He does not preserve their sins, but rather forgives them, in order to promote the fear of Him among them. This being so, the worshipper’s cry to God from the depths has certainly been heard, and he now grasps the hope that he will be able to “stand,” and not to sink into those depths.

Having internalized this message, the worshipper enters a new state: since God has certainly heard his supplications, he now – in the third stanza – anxiously anticipates God’s positive response. Although this expectation is still tinged with some concern, it is obviously quite unlike the feeling in the first stanza.

Later, in the fourth stanza, the worshipper emerges from the confines of his own personal situation and appeals to the nation of Israel. Their hope in God will unquestionably bring God’s positive response, since “kindness is with Him.” This kindness includes the forgiveness referred to in the parallel stanza, as well as something more: it includes God’s illuminating countenance turned

context (sensing that God has heard and will respond), God is described in the third person. The same phenomenon is to be found in psalm 23 and in psalm 27, and elsewhere, too – because this in fact reflects the human experience.

to those who wait for Him. And it is this that the worshipper had desired with all of his being, in the third stanza.

Thus, although the fourth stanza parallels the second, it expresses a higher degree of certainty with regard to God's response to those who wait for Him. The progression from the first stanza to the parallel third stanza demands a similar progression between the second stanza and the fourth. The second stanza brings the worshipper to the certain knowledge that God has heard his desperate cry **from below**; the fourth stanza expresses the same certainty that God will indeed respond **from on high** to those who wait for Him, and shower them with kindness and redemption. Thus, the fourth stanza brings the psalm to its climax, to the most positive awareness that the worshipper achieves throughout the psalm.

Nevertheless, the psalm does not conclude with a description of God's response; rather, this is left as an axiomatic certainty whose realization lies sometime in the future (as promised in the concluding verse).

The psalm therefore reflects a gradual, dramatic process of hope for a two-way relationship between man, who seeks deliverance from his sins, and God, with Whom reside forgiveness, kindness and redemption. This two-way relationship does in fact exist, as described in the psalm, at different levels in the worshipper's consciousness, but it is not (yet) manifest in the external reality.

Psalm 130 is made up of fifty-two words, of which there are only a little more than thirty different words.⁵ This brief unit manages to express a powerful, ongoing psychological drama. The tight, economical form of the psalm serves the broad and deep content.

L. Psalm 130 and Yom Kippur

Our analysis of this psalm has certainly highlighted its appropriateness to the Yom Kippur experience and the inner process that the worshipper undergoes, from the somber *Kol Nidrei* until the closing *Ne'ila* prayer.

At the start of this holy day, a person is bent and broken, mired in the depths of his sins. He begs God to listen to his desperate cry.

The prayer service inspires and encourages the worshipper: God is waiting for his repentance and will certainly forgive his sins, "For You do not seek the death of one who will die, but rather his return from his (evil) path, that he may live."

As the time for the *Ne'ila* prayer arrives, and the sense that our prayers have indeed been heard on high grows firm, the synagogue is enveloped in tense anticipation: we await God's positive response, "I have forgiven as you have spoken." This answer is not uttered explicitly, but the certainty of its

⁵ Some words repeat themselves, while others share a common root.

existence accompanies the sounding of the *shofar* at the conclusion of the day, and it accompanies the congregants to their homes, filled with joy and ready to perform the commandments related to the festival of *Sukkot*.

Translated by Kaeren Fish