

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION  
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)  
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**SEFER TEHILLIM**

**Shiur #06: Psalm 91 – The "Song to Counter Evil"  
(Part 1)**

**By Rav Elchanan Samet**

(1)	He who dwells in the secret places of the Most High	Shall rest in the shadow of the Almighty.
(2)	I shall say of the Lord – (He is) my refuge and my fortress;	My God, in Him I shall trust -
(3)	That He will deliver you from the snare of the fowler,	(and) from the pestilence that afflicts.
(4)	He shall cover you with His pinions	And under His wings you will find refuge
	His truth will be (your) shield and	buckler.
(5)	You shall not fear the terror at night,	(nor) the arrow that flies by day,
(6)	(nor) of the pestilence that goes about in darkness,	(nor) of destruction that wreaks waste at noon.
(7)	A thousand shall fall at your (left) side	And ten thousand at your right;
	(but) it shall not come near to you.	
(8)	Only with your eyes shall you look	And see the recompense of the wicked,
(9)	For You, O Lord, are my refuge;	
	You have made the most High Your habitation.	
(10)	No harm will come to you,	Nor will any evil come near your dwelling.
(11)	For He shall charge His angels over you,	To guard you in all of your ways.
(12)	They shall bear you on their hands,	Lest you strike your foot on a stone.
(13)	You shall tread upon the lion and the viper	And trample the young lion and the serpent.
(14)	For he has set his delight in Me – therefore I shall deliver him;	I will lift him up, for he has known My Name.
(15)	He shall call upon Me, and I shall	answer him;
	I am with him in distress;	I will deliver him and I will honor him.
(16)	I will satisfy him with long life	And show him My salvation.

**A. Question of style**

This psalm is familiar to most of us; it is recited on various different occasions.<sup>1</sup> Does this in any way help the reader who seeks to understand its meaning? The answer to this question is somewhat complex: on one hand, such close familiarity with the words and verses of the psalm – to the extent that it can be recited by heart – may assist us, in some ways. On the other hand, it is specifically this familiarity that creates the illusion of simplicity, leading us to believe that its meaning is clear and well understood, while in fact it contains many difficulties that must be resolved before we can truly understand it well.<sup>2</sup>

The subject of the psalm is clear, and all of its parts pertain to this central subject. We might borrow a verse from a different chapter in *Sefer Tehillim* (32:10) to sum up the subject of this psalm: “He who puts his trust in God – kindness will surround him.” Our psalm describes in detail both a person’s trust in God<sup>3</sup> and the kindness and protection that God grants him.<sup>4</sup>

The question that arises regarding the subject of our psalm concerns the way in which the subject is presented. Is it the person of faith himself who is the speaker here in the first person, testifying to his trust and its results,<sup>5</sup> or is the psalmist presenting the man of faith in the third person?<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the man of faith is actually presented as the second person, the psalm’s addressee.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> a. In *Massekhet Shevu’ot* 15b we find a *beraita* that explains the Mishna: “When we add to the city (Jerusalem), or to the courtyards, we do so... with two offerings of thanksgiving and **with song**.” The *beraita* teaches that one of the psalms included in this “song” is “the ‘Song to Counter Evil’, and some say – ‘to Counter Plagues’.” The Gemara explains that this refers to our psalm: “It is referred to thus (‘to Counter Evil’) since it is written, “nor will any evil come near your dwelling.” Alternatively it is “to Counter Plagues,” since it is written, “A thousand shall fall at your side.”” Further on, the *beraita* states: “He recites: (from) ‘He who dwells in the secret places of the Most High, shall rest in the shadow of the Almighty’ up to “For You, O Lord, are my refuge.” (In the printed gemara the end of verse 9 is also cited: “You have made the most high Your habitation.”) However, the Vilna Gaon, in his commentary, notes that this addition does not appear in the “Ein Yaakov,” nor in the version of this *beraita* that served the Rishonim.

b. Immediately afterwards, the gemara records that “Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi used to recite these verses” (of our psalm, before he lay down to sleep), and goes on to explain that the purpose of the recital was for protection.

Based on this custom of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, our psalm is included in the recitation of *Shema* at bedtime. Some include the psalm in its entirety, while others include only up to the words, “for You, O Lord, are my refuge” – just like the “Song to Counter Evil,” which was uttered on the occasion of extending the boundaries of the city or of the courtyards.

The reason for reciting this psalm as part of the bedtime *Shema* is clear. Night is a time of danger and of fear, and our psalm teaches that for a person who has faith in God – “You shall not fear the terror of night.” A similar reason is offered by the Tosafot for reciting the psalm as the boundaries of the city are extended: it comes to counter the enemies who would impede and attack the builders of Jerusalem; our psalm states, “and you will see the recompense of the wicked.”

c. This psalm is recited on Shabbat and on festivals in the extended form of “*pesukei de-zimra*,” along with other chapters of Tehillim.

d. It is also recited on *Motzei Shabbat*, after the *Amida*.

e. It is also recited at a funeral and when visiting a grave.

<sup>2</sup> This is true of some difficult words in the psalm (such as the expression, “*mi-ketev yashud*,” in verse 6), but we refer above mainly to the broader issues pertaining to the psalm as a whole, which we shall discuss below.

<sup>3</sup> In verses 1-2, 9, 14

<sup>4</sup> Throughout the remainder of the psalm: verses 3-8, 10-13, 14-16.

<sup>5</sup> As, for example, in psalm 27, along with dozens of other examples.

<sup>6</sup> As, for example, in chapters 1, 16, or 112, where the admirable subject of the psalm is presented in the third person.

<sup>7</sup> As, for example, in the first part of psalm 37 (1-10), and in psalm 128.

If we examine the verses of our psalm, we discover that all three of the above possibilities appear, and they are constantly being exchanged.

In verse 1, the person who trusts in God is presented in the third person:

He who dwells in the secret places of the most High, – (he) shall rest in the shadow of the Almighty.<sup>8</sup>

However, already by the second verse the trusting person speaks about himself in the first person: “I shall say of the Lord<sup>9</sup> – (He is) my refuge and my fortress; my God, in Him I shall trust.”

Then, in verse 3, there is another exchange, and the trusting person becomes the second person to whom the psalm appeals:

He will deliver **you** from the snare of the fowler....

This second-person discourse continues uninterrupted up until verse 8 (“He will cover you... you will find refuge... at your side... with your eyes shall you look....”)

In verse 9, the trusting person once again speaks in the first person, and this time he addresses God as the second person: “For You, O Lord, are my refuge.”<sup>10</sup>

The next exchange occurs in this very same verse, where the trusting person once again becomes the second person who is being addressed: “you have made your habitation on High.” This situation continues up until verse 13.

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<sup>8</sup> Two main possibilities have been offered for interpreting this verse. The Aramaic translation (Targum), the early liturgists (*paytanim*), as well as the Marshan version of Rashi and Amos Chakham’s *Da’at Mikra* edition, maintain that the subject of the verse is God, and that the verse serves as an introduction to the declaration of trust that appears in verse 2.

This interpretation gives rise to a great number of difficulties, of which we shall note only this: according to this understanding, the word “*elyon*” (most high) does not refer to God (but rather describes the “secret place”). However, later on (verse 9) we read, “You have made Your habitation on high (*elyon*),” and the similarity between “The Most High Who dwells in secret” and “Most High, You have made your habitation” is clear.

According to the other view, the subject of the verse is the person who puts his trust in God; it is he who dwells in the secret places of God (the “most High”) and rests in His shadow. Indeed, similar images are to be found throughout the rest of the psalm (verses 2,4,9).

The translation that appears here accords with the standard printed edition of Rashi on this verse. We propose that this verse serves as a sort of introduction, or general heading, for the psalm. The person who dwells in the secret places of the most High, and rests in the shadow of the Almighty, is the subject around whom the psalm centers. Obviously, our discussion above is based on this understanding of the verse.

<sup>9</sup> Literally this would seem to read, “I say **to** God,” but it means “**about** God” – as in (Bereishit 20:13), “Say, concerning me (*li*), ‘He is my brother’.” The proof for our understanding is that in the second part of the verse we read, “My God – I shall trust in Him (*bo*).” Had the psalmist been addressing God in the second person, the verse should have concluded, “I shall trust in **You**” (*bekha*).

<sup>10</sup> This is similar to what he declares in verse 2: in both places (and only in these two places) he speaks in the first person, and his declaration in both cases is similar: “God is my refuge.” Nevertheless, there is a clear difference between them: in verse 2, the person is speaking about God, in the third person – as noted above; in verse 9, he addresses God in the second person.

In verse 14 we find a final exchange: here the text once again speaks about the trusting person in the third person, as in verse 1, but this time it is clear from the content of verses 14-16 that the speaker here is God, and He speaks in the first person: “he has set his delight in Me, therefore I shall deliver him....”<sup>11</sup>

This phenomenon of subject and addressee being constantly exchanged is the main question that this psalm presents, and it will serve as our gateway to understanding its structure and its uniqueness.

## **B. The commentators’ approaches – unifying the speakers**

How did the commentators in all ages address this perplexing aspect of our psalm?

In general we may say that their exegetical efforts are aimed towards blurring the transition from one speaker to another, so as to arrive at a psalm that is uniform and harmonious from a linguistic, literary point of view.

Since, in quantitative terms, most of the psalm is addressed to the person who trusts in God in the second person, the commentators have attempted to attach and adapt the verse that speaks **about** this trusting person (verse 1), or the verses in which he speaks about himself, in the first person (verses 2, 9a), to the verses that follow, thereby transforming verses 1 to 13 into a seamless unit that addresses the second person.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, the early medieval commentators (Rishonim) adopted this overall interpretation of the psalm, proposing more or less forced meanings for the verses. Modern critical exegesis has sought a similar solution, but using its own methodology – i.e., through “version corrections” that nullify the transitions between speakers.

The scope of this *shiur* does not allow for a full and complete review of all the exegesis on our psalm. We shall therefore suffice with a few examples.

Ibn Ezra offers the following paraphrase for the first three verses:

Hear me, you who dwell in the secret places of the most High...

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<sup>11</sup> God is not the speaker in verse 1, where the trusting person is also discussed in the third person; according to our comments above (end of note 8), this verse is part of the psalmist’s declaration of his subject, at the outset. The speaker who is speaking to the trusting person in verses 3-8, 9-13 is likewise not God, and we shall discuss his identity further on.

<sup>12</sup> The final three verses – 14-16 – are not interpreted in this manner, since they cannot be understood in any way other than their simple meaning – i.e., as God talking **about** the person who trusts in Him. The fact that the speaker of these verses – God – is not the same speaker as in verses 1-13 makes this an easier proposition.

Nevertheless, the Meiri, in his commentary on these verses, still feels the need to address this change of perspective. He states: “It is the manner of prophecy to sometimes speak in the second person, and other times in the third person. Thus we find here – ‘For he has set his delight in Me – therefore I shall deliver **him**.’”

I say to you, concerning God, Who is my refuge and my fortress, and He is my God, in Whom I trust... that He will deliver you.... In other words, I have tried this, and I will be your guarantor.

Thus, all three verses become an appeal by the psalmist to a second person, and the problem of the transitions from one speaker to another (in between verses 1 and 2, and between verses 2 and 3) disappears. The problem with this interpretation is the addition of the expression “to you,” in verse 2 (after “I say”). R. Yishayahu of Trani and Radak offer similar approaches in their commentaries on these verses.

To deal with the next transition, in verse 9, Rashi adds a word into the first part of the verse, thereby removing the difficulty:

“For you **have said** (*amarta*) God is my refuge”; it is written in abbreviated form.

Thus, the speaker of these words is not the person who trusts in God, but rather the person who is addressing him.

Ibn Ezra arrives at a similar understanding, without inserting an extra word, but rather by changing the punctuation and syntax of the verse (as opposed to the cantillation):

“for” – the psalmist is speaking to the servant of God.

“for you” – the servant – God, Who is “my refuge on High” – has made your habitation.

Radak, R. Yishaya of Trani and the Meiri offer similar interpretations to the Ibn Ezra here.

The problematic nature of each of these two commentaries is quite clear.

In the Septuagint, instead of “I say” in the first person, we find “he says,” in the third person.<sup>13</sup> Some of the critical scholars, in addressing verse 2, having followed the Septuagint, while others replace the “*omar*” (I say) in the first person with “*emor*” (say) in the imperative, or “*amar*” (said) in the past tense (each involving only a change in the vocalization.)<sup>14</sup>

Verse 9 is viewed by some modern scholars in a similar manner to Rashi’s interpretation – by inserting the word “*amarta*” (you have said) into the verse, while others amend this verse, too, in keeping with the Septuagint.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> It is difficult to know whether the ancient translator indeed had recourse to such a version in Hebrew, but we must note the general trend, throughout the Septuagint, towards harmonization and removal of obstacles by making slight changes in the translation. This trend casts some doubt on the translation in our case, too. It must further be pointed out that the transition of speakers, between verses 2 and 3 remains.

<sup>14</sup> Based on the useful review by Dr. Aryeh Strikovsky in his article, “Psalm 91 as a Drama,” *Beit Mikra* 5730, pp. 72-76.

<sup>15</sup> In the Septuagint, the expression “my refuge” (*machsi*) in verse 9 appears as “your refuge.” In other words, the verse is interpreted not as an appeal to God, but rather to the person who trusts in

We do not seek to rely on dubious amendments of the text, but at the same time we do not want to be forced into interpreting the text as to the early commentators. Can we propose an explanation for this psalm on its literal level, as it appears before us, in such a way as to award exegetical and literary meaning to the transitions between speakers?

(To be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

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Him (as understood by Ibn Ezra and those who adopt his approach): "For you, the person who trusts – God is your refuge; you have made the most High your habitation." Here, too, we must accept the possibility that the translation represents a deliberate amendment of the Hebrew, for the sake of exegetical "convenience."