

**“The Lord is My Light and My Salvation” – Psalm 27**  
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Translated by Kaeren Fish

Our Sages interpret the verse in our title as referring to Rosh Ha-shana and Yom Kippur:

"My Light" – on Rosh Ha-shana, which is the Day of Judgment. As it is written, "He shall bring forth your righteousness like the light, and your judgment like the noon." "And my Salvation" – on Yom Kippur, when He saves us and forgives us for all of our sins." (*Midrash Tehillim* on Psalm 27)

This psalm is recited over a hundred times in Ashkenazi congregations during the period between Rosh Chodesh Elul and the end of Sukkot – twice daily.<sup>1[1]</sup> Hence, it is closely bound up in our consciousness with the High Holy Days.

Let us examine the psalm and assess to what extent it is, in fact, appropriate to this season of the year.

**A. Structure**

Following a review of the content,<sup>2[2]</sup> the first issue that we must consider is that of structure.

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1 [1] The earliest documentation of this custom, based on the *midrash* cited above, is apparently to be found in the *siddur* of R. Shabtai of Raskov (5548). Originally, the psalm was recited up until Yom Kippur. Once the custom had become established, it was extended on the basis of the words, "He shall hide me in His *sukka* (*be-sukko*)," referring to Sukkot. Although this addition has no source in *Chazal's* teaching, it then became customary to continue reciting the psalm until after Hoshana Rabba. Yemenite communities recite it throughout the year.

2 [2] This psalm is fairly straightforward in terms of its language, and requires little exegetical effort. Just two comments in this regard.

First, in verse 4 the psalmist declares, "One thing (*achat*) I ask of the Lord," but then goes on to elaborate no less than six separate requests or aspirations: a. "That I might dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life" (in itself an almost limitless gift!); b. To behold the pleasantness of the Lord; c. To visit His Temple; d. That He hide me in His *sukka* in the day of evil; e. To hide me in the recesses of His tent; f. To set me up upon a rock. All six elements in fact comprise a single request, but it is manifest in two fundamental forms, corresponding to the changing circumstances of the psalmist's life. In times of peace and tranquility, he seeks to dwell in God's house, to behold His pleasantness, and to visit His Temple. In times of trouble that may befall him, he asks that God's House and His Temple become a *sukka* and a tent in which God will give him shelter, and a rock upon which God will lift his head against his enemies. The House and the Temple are themselves the *sukka*,

By this I do not mean a division of the psalm into units on the basis of changing themes or subjects, as various modern commentators usually do, but rather to an attempt to discern the general plan of the psalm based on as objective an analysis as possible. Such an attempt demonstrates quite clearly that the psalm is composite of two halves of similar length,<sup>3[3]</sup> with a closing verse at the end that serves as a sort of didactic conclusion to both halves.

The following is a schematic presentation of the psalm in accordance with the structure that I propose below:

"(A psalm) of David:

Part A	Part B
(1) The Lord is my Light and my Salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?	(7) Hear, O Lord, my voice as I cry out; be gracious to me and answer me.
(2) When the wicked drew around me to consume my flesh – my enemies and my foes – they stumbled and fell.	(8) Of You my heart has said, 'Seek My face:' Your face, O Lord, I seek.
(3) Even if an army should encamp against me, my heart would not	(9) Do not hide Your face from me; do not put Your servant away in anger, You have been my help. Do not abandon me or forsake me, O God of my salvation.
	(10) For my father and my mother have forsaken me;

the tent, and the rock. All are alternative images representing the same idea: the proximity of God's Presence to which the psalmist aspires "all the days of his life."

Second, in verse 8 we read, "Of You (*lekha*) my heart has said, Seek My face; Your face, O Lord, (is what) I seek." Our understanding of this verse depends on how we explain the word "*lekha*." Ibn Ezra interprets it in accordance with R. Moshe Ibn Gikatilla: "R. Moshe taught that '*lekha*' means 'for you,' 'for your sake,' as in, 'Say for my sake (*li*), He is my brother'" (*Bereishit* 20:13). Rashi likewise explains our verse as follows: "For You. At Your behest, my heart says to me, 'Seek God's face, all of you, O Israel.' And I hearken to it (my heart): 'Your face, O Lord, I seek.'"

Further exegetical comments will appear below, as part of our discussion of the content and structure of the text.

<sup>3 [3]</sup> Although the first part contains six verses while the second part contains seven (see below), the number of words in the first part is greater (by thirteen). This arises from the long, ceremonial sentences characterizing the first part, in contrast to the brief, cut-off sentences comprising the second half.

<p>fear; if war would rise up against me, even then I would be confident.</p> <p>(4) One thing I ask of the Lord, that is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the pleasantness of the Lord, and to visit His Temple.</p> <p>(5) For He shall hide me in His <i>sukka</i> in the day of evil; He shall hide me in the recesses of His tent, He shall set me up upon a rock.</p> <p>(6) And now my head will be lifted up above my enemies around me; I shall therefore offer in His Temple sacrifices of joy; I shall sing and give praises to the Lord.</p>	<p>let the Lord then gather me up.</p> <p>(11) Teach me Your way, O Lord, and lead me on a straight path, because of my enemies.</p> <p>(12) Do not deliver me over to the will of my enemies, for false witnesses have risen up against me, and those who breathe violence.</p> <p>(13) Had I not believed that I would see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.</p>
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(14) Have hope in the Lord; be strong and He shall give courage to your heart; and have hope in the Lord."

Obviously, the primary justification for the division of the psalm into two halves is the identification of the worshipper, who speaks here in the first person. Throughout the first half of the psalm, he speaks about God in the third person, with not even one direct appeal to Him in the second person – neither when he presents his single request of God (verses 4-5) nor when he describes his future song and praise to God (verse 6). The second half, in contrast, is characterized by a direct appeal to God in all but two of the verses (10, 13), which do not affect the general atmosphere of this half.

The final verse (14) is clearly distinguished from both parts of the psalm in that the psalmist is no longer talking about himself, in the first person, but rather is appealing to some other party (the reader or listener), exhorting him and encouraging him to place his hope in God. Hence, I define this verse as a didactic conclusion to the psalm as a whole.

## B. Comparing the two halves

Obviously, this formal distinction between the two halves of the psalm is simply an expression of the fundamental difference between them. Each describes the psalmist as being in a very different frame of mind – or, more accurately, as speaking from two different religious positions, or expressing two different types of relationship between the psalmist and God. The motif that is common to both parts – the need for deliverance from the surrounding enemies – fails to blur the vast difference between them.

The first half expresses a religious position of absolute trust in God, untainted by doubt. The psalmist is aware of the existence of enemies and foes, planning evil against him and quite capable of drawing near to consume his flesh; he anticipates the possibility of war being waged against him, and voices concern over a day of evil in the future. Nevertheless, none of this undermines in any way his complete trust in God to save him from his enemies.

This sense of security arises from the ceremonial rhythm of the sentences in the first part of the psalm and their declaratory nature. Even as the psalmist expresses his one request of God, he experiences not the slightest doubt that his request will be answered – "For He shall hide me in His *sukka* in the day of evil," and his imagining of his future victory over his enemies is experienced as something occurring in the present: "And now my head shall be lifted over my enemies round about me." He concludes in a manner quite befitting the general atmosphere that prevails over this half of the psalm, envisioning his offerings in God's Temple as a gesture of thanks for his deliverance, with song and praise to God.

The reference to God in the third person here reflects the psalmist's quiet confidence. He feels God's constant presence behind the scenes of his life, and hence he feels no need to address God directly. An appeal to God in the second person often indicates a sense of distress, a sense that God is hiding His face. Indeed, this feeling pervades the second half of the psalm, with its urgent appeal to God.

The contrast in mood between the two halves, and the different positions of the psalmist in relation to God, finds expression in the tension between the end of the first half and the beginning of the second. While the first half concludes on a triumphant note of joy, with praise to God for His deliverance, the second half begins with a cry to God by a psalmist in distress, uncertain as to God's response to him: "Hear, O Lord, my voice as I cry out; be gracious to me and answer me." This feeling continues throughout this half; a person does not plead, "Do not hide Your face from me" unless he feels that God is indeed hidden from him. Moreover, the psalmist fears God's anger, which may divert him from his path, and asks, "Do not divert your servant in (Your) anger." This is a sharp contrast to the

first half, which contained no hint of any anger, *hastarat panim* (hiding of God's face), or abandonment of the psalmist by God. In the first half, all that emanates from God is light, salvation, and pleasantness.

It is interesting to compare the expressions of negation in the two halves of the psalm. Three such expressions are to be found in the first half: "Whom shall I fear?" (meaning, I shall fear no one); "Of whom shall I be afraid?"; and "My heart would not fear." These expressions are couched in experiential imagery, all conveying the same idea of complete, unreserved trust in God's salvation. In the second half, all of the negative expressions appear in the form of requests: "**Do not** hide Your face... **Do not** divert in Your anger... **Do not** abandon me and **do not** forsake me... **Do not** deliver me over to the will of my enemies..." These five requests express the psalmists anxiety and lack of confidence.

Only at the end of the second half does a spark of confidence reappear, and even this is low-key and hesitant: "Had I not believed that I would see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living..." This conditional negative formulation indicates a positive: I do believe that I will see the goodness of God while I am yet alive,<sup>4[4]</sup> for were this not so... Here, the psalmist does not finish his sentence, as though the situation he would then find himself in would be too terrible to contemplate.<sup>5[5]</sup> What a vast contrast there is between the psalm's opening clarion-call of firm belief – "The Lord is my Light and my Salvation, whom shall I fear... my heart would not fear... even then I would be confident," and the tentative expression of faith at its end – "Had I not believed..." The first is formulated as a direct, straightforward expression of certainty, and refers to the present time as the words are uttered.<sup>6[6]</sup> The second is indirect and expresses the faith that the psalmist will witness God's goodness in the land of the living some time in the future, but in the present he is still mired in the valley of tears.

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4 [4] The "land of the living," in the simplest sense – and as arising from the context here – refers to "this world" (*Ba'al ha-Metzudot* and Amos Chakham in *Da'at Mikra*).

5 [5] The early commentators interpret this differently. They connect this verse to the previous one: "For false witnesses have risen up against me" – and would have brought about my end – "had I not believed..." (Rashi). The understanding of the verse that I have proposed above recalls similar verses in *Sefer Tehillim*: "Unless the Lord had been my help, my soul would soon have rested in silence" (94:17); "Had Your Torah not been my delight, I would have perished in my sorrow" (119:92); "Were it not for the Lord Who was with us, when men rose up against us, they would have swallowed us up alive" (124:2-3).

6 [6] "The Lord is my Light and my Salvation" and "the stronghold of my life" – right now in the present, as opposed to "the goodness of the Lord," which is not yet manifest in the land of the living.

### C. Unity of the psalm

The differences between the two parts of the psalm seem so fundamental that the question arises: can this psalm indeed be viewed as a single unit?

Let us examine the contrast between the two parts of the psalm from a different perspective. The first half follows the model of activity that flows from the heavens earthward – from top to bottom. It is God Who gives light to man and saves him; man merits God's mercies, but he is completely passive. Even his victory over his enemies is not the result of his own human efforts, but rather the "automatic" result, as it were, of God's protection, hiding him in His *sukka* and lifting his head to tower over the rock. Man's only act is to praise God for his deliverance and to offer thanksgiving in the form of sacrifice and song.

This half of the psalm starts and ends with God's Name. It begins with the aspect of "My Beloved is mine" – God is my Light and my Salvation; this establishes the mood and character of the rest of this half. The concluding words (alone) express the aspect of "and I am His:" "I shall sing and give praises to the Lord.

The second half of the psalm reflects the opposite situation. Here, the direction is bottom-up. Here, it is man who appeals urgently to God, from the depths of his sense of God hiding His face. Here, too, the opening words indicate the mood that prevails until near the end: "Hear, O Lord, my voice as I cry out" – that is, "I am my Beloved's." Only at the conclusion of this half do we find a change in the direction of the action, with the expression of faith that God's goodness will be manifest in the world and witnessed by man – "and my Beloved is mine."

This view of the relationship between the two halves of the psalm offers a positive response to the question of its unity. The relationship between the main part of the first half and its conclusion is an inversion of the relationship between the main part and the conclusion of the second half. Thus, the structure is such that each half is a double, inverted parallel of the other.

The overarching unity of the two halves of the psalm finds expression in yet another element. God's Name is mentioned six times in the first half. As noted, this half begins and ends with God's Name. In the second half, as well, God's Name appears six times, but the third appearance is "the God of my salvation," unlike the other instances, where the usual Y-H-V-H is used.

The concluding verse of the psalm, as noted, represents a joint conclusion to both halves. It reflects the duality of the psalm as a whole:

"Have hope in the Lord... and have hope in the Lord." Perhaps this double declaration is meant to correspond to each of the two halves of the psalm: "Have hope in the Lord" – when you are filled with tranquil confidence and trust, as in the first half, "and have hope in the Lord" – when you are lost in the maze of your troubles and feeling that God is hidden from you. If this hypothesis is correct, then the final verse – 14 – serves to bring the total number of appearances of God's Name, in each of the halves to seven.

The above analysis of the structure of the psalm testifies to its unity and the deliberate division and character of each of its halves.

The style of the psalm also points to its overall unity: the two halves share some linguistic connections that are certainly not coincidental. At the same time, these linguistic similarities serve to emphasize the considerable difference between the two moods of the psalmist. Let us consider the following parallels:

First half:

- (1) **The Lord** is my Light and **my Salvation** [a fact]
- (2) ... **my enemies** and my foes – they stumbled and fell
- (3) Even **if** an army **should** encamp against me [a possibility]
- (4) One thing I ask of the Lord, that is what **I seek**

Second half:

- (9) Do not abandon me, **O God of my salvation** [a request]
- (12) Do not deliver me over to the will of **my enemies**
- (12) for false witnesses have **risen up** against me [something that has actually happened]
- (8) Your face, O Lord, **I seek**

The object of the psalmist's "seeking" in the first half is "to dwell in the house of the Lord" – a situation of closeness to God that the psalmist wishes to attain. The object of his "seeking" in the second half is God's "face" – His unmediated Presence.

First half:

- (5) in the day of evil **He shall hide me in the hidden places** of His tent

Second half:

- (9) **Do not hide** Your face from me

Each of these verses represents a continuation of the psalmist's request (what he "seeks"). The difference between the two requests, as discussed above, applies to their continuation here.

#### D. Duality of man's position before God

Now we must ask what is the significance of the juxtaposition of these two such different halves, and what accounts specifically for their order. Had the order been reversed, we could propose that the psalm reflected some real episode that took place: first, the psalmist experienced some acute distress, fearing that God was hiding His face, and he utters an anguished prayer for deliverance. After he is saved, he offers a prayer expressing his absolute trust in God's help in the future, as well. Indeed, many psalms follow this order.<sup>7</sup>[7] However, in our instance the order is the other way around, and hence we cannot view the two halves as referring to one single event, whose progress they follow chronologically.

Hence, it would seem that what we seek for our psalm is not a harmonistic solution, but rather an understanding of its duality as an expression of the duality that characterizes man's stance before God. In every person's life, there are situations in which the appropriate religious position is expressed in the first half, while there are other situations that are more accurately expressed in the second half.

The order of the High Holy Days is such that Rosh Ha-shana – reflecting the idea that "the Lord is my Light" – is followed by Yom Kippur, with its fasting and confession. Likewise, it is proper that every individual sets off on his life's journey with the illumination of God's closeness, with confidence and joy. Only later on does he discover the other aspect of his position before God – the state that demands urgent supplication to God in order to overcome the feeling of God's *hester panim*.

Rav Soloveitchik introduces his well-known work, "*Ma Dodekh Mi-Dod*,"<sup>8</sup>[8] with a chapter about Rosh Ha-shana and Yom Kippur. As the basis for the distinction between these two days of judgment, he invokes God's two revelations at Mount Sinai – the giving of the first Tablets in a public revelation before all of Israel, and the giving of the second tablets to Moshe alone (on Yom Kippur, according to tradition). His beautiful words serve as a fitting conclusion to our discussion of this psalm:

On Rosh Ha-shana, we hear the echo of God's voice hewing through flames of fire at the first revelation at Mount Sinai in full public

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7 [7] See, for example, psalm 28. The relationship between its first half (1-5) and its second part (6-8) is the inverse of that in our chapter. (The **thematically** corresponding parts of the two psalms share clear linguistic bonds, but we shall not elaborate on them here.)

8 [8] Printed as part of a collection of his articles, "*Be-Sod Ha-Yachid Ve-Ha-Yachad*" (Orot Yerushalayim, 5736), p. 191 onwards.



view,<sup>9[9]</sup> while on Yom Kippur we enter the company of Moshe, who stood upon the mountain and listened attentively to the still silence from which there emerged and arose the wonder of repentance and of God's kindness. The second revelation at Sinai has a different character than the first ... no wondrous light illuminated [Moshe's] way, there were no burning torches, nor was he crowned with clouds of purity... Moshe ascended the mountain, looked this way and that, sought God and did not find Him... Moshe did not cease seeking God, alone... and was seized with a great fear that perhaps God would not reveal Himself on high. God wanted Moshe to wait for Him this time, to seek Him, to plead and entreat Him with prayer. And the hour of favor arrived, and God responded and answered him... but this revelation had cost Moshe much anguish... with fear, the fear of the creature when he is severed for a short time from his Creator.

The image of the Day of Remembrance (Rosh Ha-shana) is unlike the image of Yom Kippur. On the first day of the seventh month, God comes towards man. On the tenth day of the month, man comes towards God. In God's public approach towards the nation [on Rosh Ha-shana] is enfolded the secret of Kingship and Justice. On the other hand, the private approach [on Yom Kippur] of the individual towards God, Who dwells in secret, in shadow, contains the secret of repentance.

Man may meet his Creator in two ways... Sometimes God appears to man and shows His face to him... He fills him with vitality and showers him with the dew of rejuvenation, without the person having to wait days and nights, without seeking and searching for Him... However, God often hides... and then man pleads, "Show me, I pray You, Your glory." If this person – frightened and anxious, thirsty for salvation and relief, is longing for the living God, and God does not hurry to the encounter, then he must do as Moshe did on that wondrous morning. He must seek God... with agility, assiduously, conscientiously, with exertion and compulsion. This is how one seeks and finds God.

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<sup>9 [9]</sup> The crux of the "*shofarot*" blessing, in the *mussaf* service of Rosh ha-Shana is devoted to this.

