

- Mirsky (Page 1)
- Weiner (Page 3)

MATOT-MASEI

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MY LAST CONVERSATION WITH RAV
AMITAL

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In Rav Amital's last years, I sometimes went to a Shabbat morning *minyán* that would gather in his home. Near the end of Sivan 5770, after *tefillah* and *kiddush*, I sat down to speak with him. His physical frailty was unmistakable. I opened the conversation as I always opened my conversations with him by asking, "What has the Rav been thinking about lately?" He answered me: "*Higi'a ha-zman la-ze'irim lahshov mahashavot*—it's time for the young people to think thoughts."

After taking a deep breath, I told him a story I had once heard: it described an elderly rabbi who came on *aliyah* who once told the Hazon Ish that he had nothing more left to give. The Hazon Ish quoted to him [Psalm 92](#): "The righteous will flower like the palm... in old age they yet bear fruit... to tell that God is just..." He then went on to say this: precisely when we grow old, we have a duty to teach!

I sat with him for a few more minutes before I left. It was a long walk home, and I had a lot of time to think. I understood that with these words, Rav Amital was saying goodbye; I would never see him again. I knew that with these words, he was passing on to me the teaching, the principles of education and faith, that he had tried to convey to us all over the years: to think, with alertness and depth, hand-in-hand with commitment and taking responsibility for ourselves as well as the world around us. He was faithful to that teaching throughout his life, even to the end.

When I came to the *shivah*, the room was full; I took a seat several rows back. Someone I didn't know was telling the family a story:

When I came to the *yeshiva*, I had already spent eight years in another *yeshiva*, and I used to lay *tefillin* at *minhah*. The *gabba'im* came to me and said, "Look, we don't do this around here." I decided to ask Rav Amital. He said to me, "You know, this business of wearing *tefillin* at *minhah*, by Rav Isser Zalman—I didn't see this. But you

never saw Rav Isser Zalman. Think about what you want to do, and make a decision."¹

Two weeks after his passing, we gathered again for Shabbat *tefillah* in the family apartment in Jerusalem on Rehov Shahal. Afterwards, we all sat down at tables for one last *Kiddush*. Rabbanit Miriam Amital stood up from her chair, looked around in a compassionate gaze, and said, "I'm standing because I want to see you all." She too took pains to see each and every one of us.

Ten years have passed since then. We have all had lots to think about and many decisions to make.

In 2012, I received an invitation from an American university to teach Jewish and Israel Studies, and I accepted. After about eight years, we decided to return to Jerusalem. I learned again, in my bones, that even good decisions are hard. We have to keep within ourselves a solid moral and spiritual foundation while seeing the complexity in the world and—with both in hand—acting. This work is "the study that leads to action" ([Kiddushin 40b](#)), and as Rav Amital said time and again, "There are no gimmicks." *Ein patentim*.

As surprising as it sounds, even in a university framework, distant from *yeshiva* as it is, Rav Amital's personal example lit my way. I learned from him to assume the role of educator, help students the best I could through a blend of support and challenge, and build their moral and intellectual worlds. In every course I teach—be it a survey of Hasidism, the history of Zionism, or human rights—I begin the first meeting by asking the students, "How do we want to live?"

As the years went by, the question deepened. Where did Rav Amital find that moral and intellectual courage, that inner freedom? I think they came to him from the Torah he learned in his youth.

As is known, Rav Amital regularly spoke of Rav Moshe Shmuel Glasner, the rabbi of Klausenberg, great-grandson of Hatam Sofer,

¹ Rav Isser Zalman Meltzer, author of [Even ha-Ezel](#) on Maimonides's Code, was one of the greatest Torah scholars of the twentieth century, and the grandfather of Rabbanit Miriam Amital.

author of *Dor Revi'i* on Tractate *Hullin* and Responsa of the same name, and grandfather of the *rosh yeshiva* he so admired and loved in his native Grosvardein, Rav Hayim Yehudah Levi, who was murdered along with his family in Auschwitz. Again and again, Rav Amital cited Rav Glasner's lengthy Introduction to his volume on *Hullin*, in which he says:

That which the explanation of the Torah was given orally and forbidden to write, was so as not to leave it standing for generations, and so as not to tie the hands of the Sages of each generation to explain scripture as they understand it, because only thus can we understand the eternity of Torah, for the shifts in generations and their views, their material circumstance and station demand changing their rulings, ordinances and enactments...which is a wondrous wisdom of the Torah's wisdom... so that the Torah will live with the nation and develop with it, and that is its eternity. (*Dor Revi'i al Masekhet Hullin*, p. 3)²

To Rav Glasner, Torah is akin to creation, which he describes on the [first page](#):

For there, too, human beings cannot create something out of nothing, but only mix and smelt distinct energies and elements by finding inner, hidden connections among them. Thus, Torah and creation are equal in that, and there is no difference except that creation was given to all the world's inhabitants—and our holy Torah to the chosen people, to the children of Israel, to us—to cherish and better it, to meditate on it with self-sacrifice, to attain the illumination that is in it, that it reveal to us new lights that give substance to our spiritual lives.

Like the world, Torah is given to us such that we could neither fashion it for ourselves nor utterly change it. What we do have in our hands is the ability to learn about the world, to learn Torah, and to reveal the potential it holds to bring light to the world. As a result, "All that is abominable to humanity in general, even if not expressly prohibited in the Torah, is more forbidden to us than the prohibitions of Torah" ([page 26](#)). Israel's Torah does not stand in contradiction to human moral sensitivities, which obligate us no less than the obligations of Torah.

But more—in the last year, I became aware of an additional work of Rav Glasner's: a collection of talks on the weekly Torah reading and analyses of a number of Talmudic passages, written by his students, entitled *Shevivei Esh*.³

² Moshe Shmuel Glasner, *Dor Revi'i al Masekhet Hullin* (Klausenberg: Weinstein & Friedman, 1921). These and the other works of Rav Glasner mentioned here are available at hebrewbooks.org. Rav Amital wrote a short, moving profile of his own rebbe, Rav Levi, which appears as an appendix to his posthumous work, *Resisei Tal*, Volume One (Alon Shvut: Yeshivat Har Etzion, 2010), 308-309.

³ Moshe Shmuel Glasner, *Shevivei Esh* (Des: Jacob Goldstein, 1903). I became aware of this work thanks to Dr. David Glasner, Rav Glasner's great-grandson, who has made many of his ancestor's works available on the internet (including in English translation) and has lately been distributing a weekly *parashah* sheet based on these

In this volume, I found audacious teachings which seemed to prefigure Rav Amital's ideas about moral and intellectual integrity as an integral part of serving God. What most struck me were his comments on the declaration *na'aseh ve-nishma*—"we will do, and we will listen" ([Exodus 24:7](#)). He says that when the children of Israel said 'we will do' before saying 'we will listen,' they showed that "they wanted to act before listening and learning, for they despised learning, and so the sin of the Golden Calf took place because they refused to study so that they would understand what they are doing" (*ibid.*, 14a, *Terumah*).⁴ Moreover, he says elsewhere: even if they said, 'We will do, and we will listen,' they "didn't want to be

teachings. Some of the materials can be found here <http://www.archive.math.psu.edu/glasner/Dor4/> and at Dr. Glasner's blog <https://dor4daf.com/>. All translations in this essay, though, are mine.

Yoav Sorek has recently written a doctoral dissertation on Rav Glasner, though I haven't had the opportunity to see it. One can't help contemplating the similarities and differences between Rav Glasner's independent cast of mind and that of his illustrious forbear, whose remarkable self-confidence was rooted not only in personality but also his understanding of his own place in the fabric of Ashkenazi tradition as well as the Kabbalah; on this, see Maoz Kahana's remarkable book, [Me-Ha-Noda'-bi-Yehudah le-Hatam Sofer: Halakhah ve-Hagut le-Nokhah Etgarei Ha-Zman](#) (Jerusalem: Mercaz Shazar, 2015) as well as his "[Hatam Sofer: Ha-Posek be-Eyney 'Atzmo](#)," *Tarbitz* 76:3-4 (2007), 519-556.

⁴ Rav Glasner bases this reading on [Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah \(Vilna. Ed. Naso, 7\)](#):

Rabbi Meir says it is neither like one's words, or the others; rather, even when they were saying "All God says we will do and hear," they were saying one thing while another was in their hearts, as it is written: "Yet they deceived Him with their speech, lied to him with their words" ([Psalm 78:36](#)). Lo, even on that very day they were standing before Sinai, their hearts were not true to their Creator, and this is what Isaiah says "on the day you plant, you enter into strife" ([Isaiah 17:11](#)).

This is also how Rav Glasner reconciles the seeming anomaly between Hazal's view that God commanded the *Mishkan* as soon as Israel said "*na'aseh ve-nishma*" ([Tanna de-Vei Eliyahu Rabbah 17](#)) and that the *Mishkan* was meant as a therapeutic cure for the Sin of the Calf ([Megillah 13b](#)). While he doesn't say so explicitly, he seems to also have in mind the comment in [Shabbat 88a](#)—that the people of Israel were "an impetuous people, whose mouths ran ahead of their ears."

Shortly after completing this essay, I came across a very interesting passage in Rabbeinu Menahem ha-Meiri, *Hibbur ha-Teshuvah - Shever Gaon*, 12 (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 2018) [Moshe Zuriel, ed.], p. 519, which says that "*na'aseh ve-nishma*" means undertaking study of the meaning and reasons of *mitzvot* hand-in-hand with performance, since Israel was assured that the *mitzvot* were sure to be rooted in divine wisdom, as God would not issue arbitrary commands.

responsible for one another and let the guilt of the community be on each of their heads” (ibid., 49a, *Shavuot*).⁵

Rav Glasner is critical of the Israelites who refused to learn and think before acting, and he explains that this is how they fell into the sin of the Golden Calf. He connects their theological failure to the moral—study and understanding elicit moral responsibility and an awareness of shame. That takes everyone thinking for themselves, and Israel wasn’t interested.

These comments of Rav Glasner bespeak deep faith in God, His world, and His Torah, and in the human beings to whom He has given both, to cultivate and keep. This is no limp, passive faith, but a demanding call for intellectual, moral and soulful exertion. It is a faith that calls on us to see what is shared among Israel and all the world’s inhabitants without giving up on our own identity as the people of the Torah.

Quarried from home and the pits of slaughter, this is the Torah Rav Amital brought with him to the Land of Israel. Back in Hungary he had already begun to conjoin his masters’ teachings with those of Rav Kook (as is well known).⁶ In light of the Torah of his youth, we can better understand his being drawn to Rav Kook’s call to find piety in our natural moral sense—and on that solid foundation, build society and ourselves.⁷

One feature of Rav Kook’s teaching is the call to realize our own interiority—not by fleeing responsibility for the world around us, but by taking on that responsibility: the understanding that each and every one of us, in all our distinctiveness, is created in God’s image. That is why Rav Amital said over and over that he didn’t want a bunch of “little Amitals” but urged us to think for ourselves and make decisions on our own, whether they concerned laying tefillin at *minhah* or matters of public affairs bearing more far-reaching consequences.

Our world today – a decade after his death – seems more challenging than ever: society is torn between bitter tribalism and crushing globalization, looming ecological catastrophe along with new technologies rendering beyond recognition the very experience of being human. These challenges can summon us to deeper solidarities, to deeper awareness of our fitting place on earth, to our humanity. This is the time for us to think thoughts and act—and, with the Torah, answer the question: “How do we want to live?”

⁵ Thus Rav Glasner explains why God enjoined Moses to speak harshly to Israel before the revelation at Sinai, saying “and now, if you will listen carefully to My voice” ([Exodus 19:5](#)).

⁶ See, in general, Reuven Ziegler and Yehudah Mirsky, “[Torah and Humanity in a Time of Rebirth: Rabbi Yehuda Amital as Educator and Thinker](#),” in [Torah and Western Thought: Intellectual Portraits of Orthodoxy and Modernity](#), eds. Meir Y. Soloveichik, Stuart W. Halpern, and Shlomo Zuckier (Jerusalem/New York: Maggid Books/Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought, 2015), 179–217. The essay is available at this writer’s page on [academia.edu](#).

⁷ This idea is found woven throughout Rav Kook’s corpus of writings; the best-known formulation, often cited by Rav Amital, appears in [Orot ha-Kodesh](#), vol. 3, p. 27; it also appears in [Shemonah Kevatzim 1:75](#).

PSALM 121: OF PILGRIMS, PERILS, AND A PERSONAL GOD

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Shir la-ma`alot. Esa einai el he-harim: me-ayin yavo ezri? A Song of Ascents. I lift up mine eyes unto the mountains: from whence shall my help come?

Entering the sixth month of a global health crisis that has rocked communities around the world, this question from Psalms has been on more lips than usual. Within the Jewish world, leading Orthodox groups, from the [OU](#) to [Agudah](#), have called for increased Tehillim recitation and provided virtual platforms by which people can recite these psalms together. On a much bigger stage, Senator James Lankford of Oklahoma [recited](#) Psalm 121 in its entirety on the floor of the US Senate during a March debate over a COVID-19 stimulus package bill. Given the preeminent role that Psalms have historically played in comforting and uplifting Jews and Christians during periods of crisis, I thought it would be worthwhile to study the text and context of one such psalm. Taking Lankford’s lead, I picked Psalm 121, in the hopes that its ancient message might resonate as many of us begin venturing out more fully into the world once again, confronted by risks and dangers both old and new.

א שִׁיר לַמַּעֲלוֹת אֲשֶׁא עֵינַי אֶל הַהָרִים מֵאֵין יְבֵא עֲזָרִי.
ב עֲזָרִי מֵעַם יְהוָה עֲשֵׂה שְׂמִים וְאָרֶץ.
ג אֵל יִתֵּן לַמוֹט רַגְלֶךָ אֵל יְנוּם שְׁמֶרְךָ.
ד הִנֵּה לֹא יְנוּם וְלֹא יִישָׁן שׁוֹמֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל.
ה ה' שְׁמֶרְךָ יְהוָה צִלְךָ עַל יַד יְמִינֶךָ.
ו יוֹמָם הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ לֹא יַכְּךָ וְלַיְלָה בִּלְיָלָה.
ז ה' יִשְׁמְרֶךָ מִכָּל רָע יִשְׁמֵר אֶת נַפְשְׁךָ.
ח ה' יִשְׁמֵר צִאתְךָ וּבואֶךָ מֵעַתָּה וְעַד עוֹלָם.

1. A Song of Ascents. I will lift up mine eyes unto the mountains: from whence shall my help come?
2. My help cometh from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.
3. He will not suffer thy foot to be moved; He that keepeth thee will not slumber.
4. Behold, He that keepeth Israel doth neither slumber nor sleep.
5. The Lord is thy keeper; the Lord is thy shade upon thy right hand.
6. The sun shall not smite thee by day, nor the moon by night.
7. The Lord shall keep thee from all evil; He shall keep thy soul.
8. The Lord shall guard thy going out and thy coming in, from this time forth and forever.

Despite its brevity, clocking in at a mere eight verses, Psalm 121 has attracted much attention from readers over the ages in two primary, and perhaps contradictory, ways. While its simple, rhythmic, and beautiful expressions of faith have made it a favorite of Jewish and Christian public worship and personal prayer, Bible scholars and literary critics have been baffled by basic questions about its structure, grammar, cast of characters, and *Sitz Im Leben* — the original context of its creation and recitation. Indeed, nearly every line of this psalm has been painstakingly interrogated by scholars, leading to very different conclusions about its meaning and function.

While a cursory read of the Psalm might make it seem like the prayer of one individual calling out to God for help, the organization of the chapter compels us to search for a different *Sitz Im Leben*. The abrupt grammatical change from first person (“I will lift up **mine** eyes”) to second person (“He will not suffer **thy** foot to be moved”) between verses 2 and 3 seems to indicate the presence of multiple characters and begs the question: is this a dialogue between two live speakers

or an internal imagined dialogue meant to reassure an individual reader? And if a dialogue, of what kind — a chorus song recited by a band of pilgrims, a priestly blessing, or a traveler's leave-taking ceremony? To resolve this question, the textual evidence of the rest of the Psalm must be marshalled to see which possibility works best within the broader context of the chapter. For example, is "I lift up mine eyes unto the mountains" (v. 1) an idiomatic reference to prayer, an expression of fear about an upcoming journey, or an initial temptation to turn to the idolatrous non-Israelite gods of the hills (a la [1 Kings 23:20](#))? This ambiguity explains the *modus operandi* of scholarship about this psalm: first positing a theory of its original setting, and then "plugging in" the textual data accordingly to make it fit.

Because of its aforementioned fame and ambiguity, this Psalm has been the subject of much theorizing and analysis, so much so that "Scholars have proposed no less than fifteen basic *Sitze im Leben* for this Psalm."⁸ Within this amorphous chaos of interpretation, there is some consensus: most scholars believe that this psalm is about or for "a pilgrim or traveler at some point on a trip destined for Jerusalem," which would then identify the mountains of verse 1 as referring to "the hills on which Jerusalem rests, especially or particularly Mount Zion on which Yahweh dwells in his temple."⁹ The best evidence for this is the superscription of our psalm, *Shir Ha-ma'alot* (which appears in Psalms 120-134), and indicates that it is a "reference to the "going up" to Jerusalem for the annual festivals held there."¹⁰ As a result, we can read these psalms as pilgrimage psalms, a kind of "handbook for pilgrims"¹¹ to be recited by individuals or groups on their journey to Jerusalem. Although this reading does not answer all of the questions raised by the tricky language of this psalm, it gives us a context for the expressions of faith and blessings of divine protection that permeate the text. In understanding this psalm as a sort of "*tefillat ha-derekh*," we can explicate the rich meaning of the leitwort "*shemirah*," which appears six times in eight verses, and appreciate the sundry evils mentioned throughout as specifically referring to the dangers of the road. In a context of travel and pilgrimage, protection and blessing are not mere metaphorical abstractions but immediate needs for concrete threats. Finally, this *Sitz Im Leben* will enable us to understand the theological assertions of this psalm as assurances and comforts to a nervous pilgrim about the reach of God's providence, that the "Guardian of Israel" (v. 4) and "Maker of heaven and earth" (v. 2) is also the guide and protector of us all on our individual journeys through life.

As a "song of ascent," our psalm begins on an ironic note. Our would-be pilgrim raises his eyes in the direction of the hills of Jerusalem and feels not awe or praise, but fear: "I will lift up mine eyes unto the mountains: from whence shall my help come? (v. 1)?" Though he yearns to make the trek and arrive in Jerusalem, the danger of the journey gives him pause. While some do interpret "to the mountains" as an "idiom meaning... the heavenly heights above,"¹² Amos Hakham, in his introduction to the psalm, reads it more straightforwardly as the "sentiments of a man going on a journey through the mountains. He lifts up his eyes toward the mountains through which he will pass and he asks himself: is there anyone

among these mountains who will come to my assistance and protect me from the dangers that lie in store for travellers?"¹³ From here, verse 2 comes across as somewhat strange: "My help cometh from the Lord, who made heaven and earth." Is the pilgrim simply answering his own question? And if so, was it merely a rhetorical one? Either way, this line itself is clearly not a sufficient answer to the question, as we have six additional verses in the chapter. To read this line matter-of-factly, as some scholars do, that "after some thought and reflection, he replies to his own question, 'The real source of my help is Yahweh'"¹⁴ seems to misunderstand the tone. Rather, I would read this line as a depiction of our anxious pilgrim grasping at straws. One scholar creatively imagines verse 2 as a kind of "traditional saying,"¹⁵ in which case the pilgrim would be repeating an old and reassuring maxim about the Lord's protection to comfort himself. And yet, it does not seem to work. Why not?

In verse 3, the confusion mounts: "He will not suffer thy foot to be moved; He that keepeth thee will not slumber." Who is speaking here? Clearly not the pilgrim of verses 1 and 2, who referred to himself in the first person! While we probably cannot know for sure, Amos Hakham suggests that it is someone "giving a parting blessing to the traveler about to leave on his journey..." you spoke well, and I assure you that the Lord, in whose help you trust, will not allow you to come to harm on your journey."¹⁶ Thus establishing the *Sitz Im Leben* of a "dismissal ceremony" or "leave-taking"¹⁷ might lead us to identify the structure of the psalm in the following way: "v. 1-2 are 'The one about to set out says:' and v. 3-8 are 'The one staying behind addresses the traveller.'"¹⁸ If there is indeed a dialogue here, then we must reread verses 1-2. Instead of a simple question that is fully addressed with a cursory, satisfying answer, we have a question that *lingers*. It is undoubtedly true that "My help cometh from the Lord, who made heaven and earth," but the pilgrim needs more reassurance, more comfort, and more understanding of the nature of God's protection than just this. "Where does my help come from?" is thus the guiding question of this psalm, and the blessings of vv. 3-8 (whether by fellow pilgrims or those staying at home) are a drawn-out answer, both illustrating and praying for the protection that God offers to all of Israel.

Our second speaker's soothing reassurances continue, with a strong theological message thrown in for good measure. In an article exploring this Psalm, the biblical scholar Bob Becking compares verses 3 and 4: "Verse 3 ends with 'your guardian' while v. 4 has the phrase 'the guardian of Israel' at the end. This parallelism indicates that the phrases refer to each other and are similar in meaning... The divine care for the people as a whole, does not exclude attention to the individual."¹⁹ The parallel is clearer in the Hebrew, where the root sh.m.r. is used twice in quick succession. And so, the God to whom our pilgrim initially referred as the "Maker of heaven and earth" has become the "guardian of Israel," and also (most importantly), the God who "watches over you." In addition to this theological point about God's providence reaching not only the world at large or Israel

⁸John T. Willis, "An Attempt to Decipher Psalm 121:1b," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 52:2 (1990): 242.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 246.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 244.

¹¹ James Limburg, "Psalm 121: A Psalm for Sojourners," *Word and World* (1985): 182.

¹² Willis, "An Attempt to Decipher Psalm 121:1b," 244.

¹³ Amos Hakham, *Psalms (Da'at Mikra)* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 2003), 293.

¹⁴ Willis, "An Attempt to Decipher Psalm 121:1b," 248.

¹⁵ Bob Becking, "God-Talk for a Disillusioned Pilgrim in Psalm 121," *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 9, (2009): 10.

¹⁶ Hakham, 293.

¹⁷ John T. Willis, "Psalm 121 As A Wisdom Poem," *Hebrew Annual Review*, 11 (1987): 441.

¹⁸ Limburg, 184.

¹⁹ Becking, 8.

as a nation but also to individuals, some see a more explicit polemical argument about the relative power of YKVK versus foreign deities latent in v. 4: "...some within Israel thought of Yahweh too as sleeping when the wicked were allowed to oppress the innocent. Nonetheless, the more authentic Israelite impulse affirms that Yahweh is always vigilant."²⁰ This added intention seems plausible, especially in light of Elijah's pointed mockery of the priests of Ba'al in I Kings 18:27 and the god they serve: "Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened!" And yet, once again, it feels rather out of place. If the *Sitz Im Leben* is indeed a pilgrim's prayer for protection on his journey to Jerusalem, reminders about the supremacy of YKVK are certainly warranted, but subtle theological jabs seem out of step with the overall tone. Just as the "hills" in verse 1 do not obliquely refer to foreign gods, so too, I would contend that the insistence that YKVK will neither "slumber nor sleep" is not a declaration of dogma, but rather a colorful depiction of the character of YKVK's *shemirah*. Without wading too deeply into the waters of biblical metaphors and anthropomorphism, it is fair to say that the declaration "God is a *shomer*" is itself a metaphor of some sort, in that it compares YKVK's protection to the work of a sentry manning his post for incoming threats. As Limburg notes: "That which is essential in the work of a watchman is that he stay awake. The Lord, says Psalm 121, is the Good Watchman who remains alert, neither dozing off nor sleeping."²¹ Thus, the lines about YKVK not sleeping are not theological remarks, but rather elaborations on the theme of *shemirah* denoting Him as the *shomer* par excellence. Unlike human watchmen, YKVK does not desperately "wait for the morning (cf. Psalms 130:6)," for His "shift" is eternal.

Verses 5 and 6 extend the themes of protection and journeying: "The Lord is thy keeper; the Lord is thy shade upon thy right hand. The sun shall not smite thee by day, nor the moon by night." At risk of pointing out the obvious, the two lines are connected: because YKVK will be "your shade," as our blesser puts it, you will not be harmed by sun or moonlight. While the Hebrew word *tsel* can mean somewhat different things depending on the context, I would link our word to an occurrence in Genesis 19:18, where Lot attempts to hold back the rapacious mob from attacking his angelic guests by insisting that "they have come under the protection of my roof," where protection here is that same word, "*tsel*." In Genesis, the word refers to the protection a host offers his guests through the shelter of his roof over their heads, while in Psalm 121, YKVK Himself acts as a *tsel*, a roof-like force shielding travelers from the elements, and especially the moon/sunstroke our psalm mentions. Consequently, verse 5 sets up an interesting parallelism between two different metaphors: YKVK is a *shomer*, a watchman (5a) and also a *tsel*, a protective "sukkah" of sorts, like Jonah's, guarding against inclement weather.

Additionally, as Becking helpfully notes, "the reference to sun and moon is a merism (the juxtaposition of two opposing words to refer to a complete whole). By referring to these two extremes, the whole circle of day and night is indicated. This merism parallels the expression of faith that YHWH neither slumbers nor sleeps."²² Once again, some scholars see a religious polemic here: "the assurance that Yahweh will protect the psalmist from the sun and moon (v. 6) may reflect an ancient belief that the sun, moon, and stars were deities... But the Israelites affirmed that Yahweh is greater than the

heavenly beings, for he created them."²³ This time, it seems more unlikely. The exact same usage of the sun, "smiting" (the root n.k.h.) appears in Jonah 4:8: "The sun beat upon the head of Jonah, that he fainted," and Psalm 91, which also contains a litany of dangers for travelers, uses the similar poetic device of describing their appearance by night and day: You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day" (v. 5). Thus, our psalm's prayer against sunstroke nicely captures the realia of ancient travel while also emphasizing the nature of YKVK's all-encompassing protection, which has been built up since verse 3: He will never "fall asleep on the job," (v. 4) even to the point of "letting your foot slip" (v. 3) and will carefully watch over you as a good guardian would, both by day and by night — 24/7.

The last two lines of the Psalm bring everything to a close — the journey and the chapter together: "The Lord shall keep thee from all evil; He shall keep thy soul. The Lord shall guard thy going out and thy coming in, from this time forth and forever." Limburg brings to our attention the expansion of God's protection that occurs in the latter verses: "Vv. 3-6 had promised the Lord's protection from the dangers of the day and the night; now the Psalm asserts that 'the Lord will protect you from all evil.' Vv. 3-6 had been concerned with the Lord's watching over for a specific journey; now the Psalm asserts that the Lord will watch over 'your life.'"²⁴ Perhaps there is another shade (pun intended) of significance to this expansion as well, given the pilgrimage context. While verses 3-6 had focused on the immediate present of the journey, verses 7-8 look ahead to the future, to the pilgrim's return home and resumption of life. He might feel that, having left the presence of YKVK and His throne in Jerusalem, the levitical blessing of "May the Lord bless thee and keep thee" has grown stale and worn off. It would then be for this reason, perhaps, that Psalm 121 closes on decisive, repeated notes of divine protection throughout life, even long after the pilgrimage to God's house has ended.

Ultimately though, the immediate context of the psalm is less significant than its larger message, which asserts itself as relevant in all times and places. As Becking points out, "The character of the pilgrim's need is unknown. This absence of clarity is at the same time the power of this psalm."²⁵ While its superscription, reference to hills, and depiction of a journey leave us confident that its foregrounded meaning is of a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, its final message of ubiquitous, all-embracing Divine *shemirah* that follows us day by day, stone by stone, is certainly much larger. When contemplating and relating to God as the creator of heaven and earth is insufficient to instill this faith, the blessings of our psalm, with its emphasis on a personal, persistent relationship and individualized protection are the assurances that every pilgrim wants and needs to hear. Both on and off the road, from subways to supermarket lines, may we feel the comforting shade of God's love and protective care, "from this time forth and forever.

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²⁰ Bernard F. Batto, "The Sleeping God: An Ancient Near Eastern Motif of Divine Sovereignty," *Biblica* 68:2 (1987): 155.

²¹ Limburg, 185.

²² Becking, 9.

²³ Willis, "Psalm 121 As A Wisdom Poem," 446.

²⁴ Limburg, 186.

²⁵ Becking, 5.