

## ***“Be-Shuv Hashem et Shivat Tziyon”: A Widely Misunderstood Biblical Phrase***

**By: MITCHELL FIRST**

We have all recited the above phrase at Psalms 126:1 hundreds of times. Recently, I came across a brief mention in a work by Rabbi Hayyim Angel of a surprising interpretation of this phrase.<sup>1</sup> This interpretation greatly affects two of the six verses in this psalm and is little known in the Orthodox world.<sup>2</sup> I would like to share it here.

Let us look closely at our phrase. Some view the word “*shivat*” as referring to those who were captured and exiled.<sup>3</sup> According to this view, the root of the word is שבה = “to take captive,” and the phrase refers to God’s bringing back the captive nation. Others view “*shivat*” as referring to “returnees,” deriving from the root שוב = “to return,” and the phrase refers to God’s bringing back the returnees.<sup>4</sup> There is, however, a different interpretation of the phrase for which I advocate. This interpretation, mentioned as a possible one by Rabbi Angel, is the one adopted in the *Da’at Mikra* edition of *Tehillim* (published by Mossad Harav Kook).

There is a common expression in *Tanakh* that has the form שוב + שבות. The first word is based on the word שוב in some form. The second word is based on the word שבות or שבית in some form. There is

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<sup>1</sup> See his *Psalms: A Companion Volume* (2022), p. 129.

<sup>2</sup> The interpretation I am sharing is not the one in the widely used 1917 Jewish Publication Society of America translation. Nor is it the one in *The Traditional Prayer Book*, ed. De Sola Pool (RCA, 1960). Nor is it in the *Tanakh* published by Koren (2000), nor in *The Koren Siddur* (2009). Nor is it in the *Siddur Avodat HaLev* (RCA, 2018). Nor is it mentioned in any of the works published by ArtScroll.

<sup>3</sup> This view was found long ago in the *Targumim*.

<sup>4</sup> Another view sees “*shivat*” as referring to those who come back to God in *teshuvah*. See, e.g., Radak.

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Mitchell First, an attorney, has an M.A. from Bernard Revel Graduate School. He has authored *Jewish History in Conflict* (1997), *Esther Unmasked: Solving Eleven Mysteries of the Jewish Holidays and Liturgy* (2015), *Roots and Rituals* (2018), *Links to Our Legacy* (2021), and *Words for the Wise* (2022) as well as articles for *Hakirah*, *Biblical Archaeology Review*, and *AJS Review*. His writing focuses on ancient history, liturgy, and etymology. He can be reached at MFirstAtty@aol.com.

often a “*ketiv/keri*” on the second word signifying the issue of whether it should read שבות or שבית.<sup>5</sup> Some examples:

- Psalms 14:7 “*be-shuv Hashem shevut amo...*” (See similarly Psalms 53:7.)
- Psalms 85:2: “*shavta shevut Yaakov.*” (The “*keri*” on “*shevut*” is “*shevit.*”)
- Hosea 6:11: “*be-shuvi shevut ami.*”
- Jeremiah 48:47: “*ve-shavti shevut Moav...*”
- Job 42:10: “*Hashem shav et shevit Iyyon*”...<sup>6</sup> (The “*keri*” on “*shevit*” is “*shevut.*” The context here is the end of the story: Job being restored to prosperity. God is giving him twice as much as he had before.)

Expressions in this form appear thirty-one times in Tanakh.<sup>7</sup> (Only once, however, in the Torah, at Deut. 30:3.) Originally, a widespread understanding of the expression was that it referred fundamentally to a bringing of people back from captivity. In modern times, however, a different understanding of the nature of the expression has arisen. The expression refers to a **decisive turn** in a person or people’s fortune for the better,<sup>8</sup> and is from the root שׁוּב. A loose modern translation of the

<sup>5</sup> Sometimes “*shevut*” is changed to “*shevit.*” Other times, the change is the reverse. See the discussion at *Da’at Mivra* to Psalms 85:2. There does not seem to be any principle at work. The meaning of both words seems to be the same.

<sup>6</sup> It is important that I not omit the subsequent phrase: “*be-bitpallelo be-ad reieihu*” (=when he prayed for his friends). See *Bava Kamma* 92a.

<sup>7</sup> For the many other occasions that this expression appears, see the concordance of A. Even-Shoshan, pp. 1104 (“*shevut*”) and 1106 (“*shevit*”).

<sup>8</sup> A mid-19<sup>th</sup> century gentile scholar who argued for this interpretation was Heinrich Ewald. See S.R. Driver, *Deuteronomy* (1895), p. 329. Also adopting this interpretation was S.D. Luzzatto (d. 1865). See his commentaries on Deut. 30:3 and Jer. 29:14. The suggestion has been made that the literal meaning of the expression is “to turn a turning.” It is the doubling of the word that emphasizes the phrase and perhaps this is a way of saying “a decisive turning.” A different etymological explanation is offered by Rabbi Elhanan Samet in his *Iyyunim be-Mizmorei Tehillim* (2012), pp. 360-389. He cites the linguist N. Tur-Sinai’s comments that are included in the multi-volume dictionary of Eliezer Ben-Yehudah. Tur-Sinai writes here, in the entry for שׁוּב, that our expression should be analogized to words like גלגל and דקדק and that the second word “*shevut*” (or “*shevit*”) does not have an independent meaning and is just there for emphasis. I have also seen the suggestion by J. Tigay (cited below) that the second word was originally pronounced “*shavut,*” giving it an even more emphatic sound.

expression is “restores the fortunes of.”<sup>9</sup> It seems that most modern scholars agree with this understanding of the expression.<sup>10</sup> (The fact that Job was never in captivity had always been a weakness with the original understanding.)

*Da’at Mikra* suggests that we should translate “*be-shuv Hashem et shivat Tziyon*” in accordance with the above expression.<sup>11</sup> Of course, our verse has the word שיבת, and not the words שבות or שבית. Nevertheless, *Da’at Mikra* points out that the word שיבת appears nowhere else and suggests that it should be understood here as if it was שבות or שבית.<sup>12</sup> After reading this, I investigated further and discovered that one of the two Dead Sea texts of this verse, the one from Cave 4, has the reading

<sup>9</sup> Or its rough equivalent: “restores the prosperity of.”

<sup>10</sup> There is a view that “*shuv*” + “*shevut*” means “restoring the fortunes,” while “*shuv*” + “*shevit*” means “returning the captives.” If one takes this view, however, one has to admit that the texts as they have come down to us do not support this distinction. (*Da’at Mikra* to Job 42:10 refers to this view.) Also, as R. Samet points out, p. 383, all those “*shevut*” and “*shevit*” words are preceded by a word from the root שוב, and not by a word related to the root for captivity (שבה). It is unlikely that this is a coincidence.

In one place, the prophet Ezekiel seems to explain the expression. If one compares Ezekiel 16:53, which has the expression a few times, with the explanation given at Ezekiel 16:55, we see that the expression means “*tashovnah le-kadmatan*.” The best translation of these two words is “will return to their former status.” The verse does not seem to be talking about a restoration to a prior location (a return to an “*eret*”).

<sup>11</sup> See *Da’at Mikra* on 126:1 and on the earlier Psalms verses: 14:7, 53:7 and 85:2. Even-Shoshan adopts this interpretation in his concordance. See his entry for “*shivat*” at p. 1134. Long ago, Luzzatto adopted this interpretation to our verses. See his commentaries cited above.

The *Bronn-Driver-Briggs* lexicon (1906), p. 986, does not adopt the “restore the fortunes” interpretation to Psalms 126:1 or 126:4, but adopts it in some of the other verses.

The 1917 Jewish Publication Society translation had “brought back those that returned to Zion” in verse 1 and “turn our captivity” in verse 4. The Soncino commentary (1945), which utilized the above as its main translation, suggested our preferred interpretation in its comments to verses 1 and 4. Also, *The Authorised Daily Prayer Book* by Rabbi Dr. Joseph Hertz (1941) followed our preferred interpretation in verses 1 and 4.

The *siddur* authored by Philip Birnbaum (1949) followed our preferred interpretation in verse 4, but not in verse 1. In modern times, Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms* (2009), followed our preferred interpretation in both verses.

<sup>12</sup> P. 463, n. 1A. This is the view of R. Samet as well (p. 382).

שבות.<sup>13</sup> (The other Dead Sea text of this verse, from Cave 11, is ripped at this crucial spot and lacks our word.<sup>14</sup>)

*Da'at Mikra* did not realize this but one can argue based on an Aramaic text from Syria from the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE that שיבת is the correct reading. From this text discovered in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it seems that in Aramaic שיבת can be the second word in our expression.<sup>15</sup> Alternatively, שבות may have been the original text in our verse,<sup>16</sup> but we can now at least understand how the word שיבת could have arisen.

Because our expression appears thirty-one times in *Tanakh*, including, as we will see, verse 126:4, almost certainly our interpretation is what is reflected in verse 1.

We will address shortly whether verse 1 is describing the past—as *Da'at Mikra* claims in its main interpretation—or is a request for the future. The next word in the verse, היינו, is ambiguous as to whether it is

<sup>13</sup> See *Discoveries in the Judaean Desert* 16, p. 83 (2000). Our verse is in a fragment which, together with many other fragments, are labeled 4QPs<sup>c</sup> (or 4Q87). This set of fragments can be viewed online. In the various materials I read in preparing this article, I did not come across anyone else who cited this Dead Sea text. (Of course, the above *Discoveries in the Judaean Desert* volume was only published in 2000.)

The *Da'at Mikra, Tebillim* volume, in its section of variant readings in early medieval Biblical manuscripts and important early printed editions, does not mention any variants on the word “shivat.” (But the late 18<sup>th</sup>-century *Vetus Testamentum Hebraicum*, a collection of over 600 Biblical manuscripts, does mention several with “shevut” and one with “shevit.”)

Finally, the newly discovered commentary on most of Psalms that is most likely that of Rashbam is included on the alhatorah.org site (which also includes the details as to how this commentary came to light). When this commentary cites verse 1, it cites the verse with the reading שבות.

<sup>14</sup> See J.A. Sanders, *The Dead Sea Psalms Scroll* (1967), p. 40.

<sup>15</sup> The text I am referring to has the phrase "השבו אלהן שיבת" and the phrase here seems to mean: the gods restored the fortunes [of my father's house]. See J. Tigay, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy* (2003), p. 399 and J. Greenfield, “Stylistic Aspects of the Sefire Treaty Inscriptions,” *Acta Orientalia* 29 (1965), pp. 1-18, at p. 4.

M. Dahood, *Psalms III: 101-150* (Anchor Bible, 1970) agrees with the “restores the fortunes of” interpretation in verse 1 and strongly defends our present reading based on the above Aramaic inscription. (Elsewhere in our chapter, however, he feels free to propose many emendations!) He also agrees with the “restores the fortunes of” interpretation in verse 4 (although he proposes a slight emendation).

<sup>16</sup> Note that all the other occasions of the expression in Psalms (14:7, 53:7, and 85:2) have the written text as שבות.

referring to the past or the future,<sup>17</sup> so we cannot tell based on our verse alone.

Let us now look at verse 4: “*shuvah Hashem et shevuteinu*<sup>18</sup> (*kri: shevuteinu*) *ka-afikim ba-negev*.” Prior to reading this article, you surely thought that “*shevuteinu*” in this verse was referring to “captives” or “returnees.” Here, for example, is what is found in *The Complete ArtScroll Siddur*: “return our captivity...”<sup>19</sup> In light of our expression, however, let us translate verse 4 as, “God, restore our fortunes, like those riverbeds<sup>20</sup> in the dry land [get restored with water].”<sup>21</sup>

Since verse four is a prayer for the future, we should interpret verse 1 as describing the future as well.<sup>22</sup> The proper translation of verse 1 is

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<sup>17</sup> Although *היינו* usually refers to events in the past, it sometimes refers to events in the future. See, e.g., Gen. 34:16 and 47:25. The same issue of ambiguity occurs with words like *הייחם*.

<sup>18</sup> *Da'at Mikra*, in their section of variants, p. 56, mentions *שביתנו* as a variant reading.

<sup>19</sup> I.e., our captive nation.

<sup>20</sup> “*Afik*” appears many times in Tanakh in various forms. It is often used in contrast to “*bar*” and “*givah*.” Its primary meaning is the channel in the valleys and other lower areas that holds the water. Sometimes the word refers to the water itself. E. Klein, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language for Readers of English* (1987), defines the word as “riverbed, channel.” The *Brown-Driver-Briggs* lexicon has “channel.”

<sup>21</sup> Here, for example, are the comments of Alter: “The reference is to wadis, or dry water gulches, that with the onset of the rainy season, are filled with streams of water. It is an apt image for restoring the previous condition of a desolate Zion...”

<sup>22</sup> R. Hirsch takes this approach in his commentary to Psalm 126 and most traditional interpreters do so as well. The works published by ArtScroll also take this approach. A detailed article advocating this approach (although arguing for a 6<sup>th</sup>-century BCE dating) is by Yitzhak Etshalom in *Megadim* 42 (2005), pp. 49-59. He interprets all six verses as prayers for the future. (He mentions our “restoration of fortunes” interpretation but does not adopt it.) In contrast, *Da'at Mikra* and many others take the first three verses as referring to the past. With regard to the “*az yimalei*” and “*az yomru*” at verse 2, these phrases can be understood as referring to an event in the past. See, e.g., Ex. 15:1, Num. 21:17, and Deut. 4:41, and the many other verses collected at Even-Shoshan, p. 29. But, as stated in the text above, once we realize that verse 4 is a prayer for the future, this suggests that verse 1 describes the future as well. *Da'at Mikra* takes the position that verse 4 can be interpreted as merely a prayer to continue the restoration process that has already begun.

Another who interprets the first three verses as referring to the past is R. Samet. R. Angel summarizes R. Samet's view: “[T]he psalm reflects the complex mood in Israel at the beginning of the Second Temple period. On the one

thus: “when God will restore the fortunes of Tziyon, we will be like dreamers.”

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By interpreting verse 1 as referring to the future, I am not trying to turn it into a prayer by King David. This chapter is one of fifteen “*Shir Ha-Ma’alot*” chapters and one of them is chapter 137. Chapter 137 begins, “*Al nabarot Bavel sham yashavnu gam bakbinu be-zakbreinu et Tziyon.*” This chapter was almost certainly composed at some point after Jews were exiled to Babylonia.<sup>23</sup> Presumably, chapter 126 was as well.

Moreover, I have written much on the acrostics of the book of Psalms, which are found in the first and fifth books.<sup>24</sup> My research has shown that the fifth book (chapters 107-150) cannot date from the period of King David or the First Temple period. All the archaeological finds in ancient Israel from the period of the First Temple and prior follow the “*pe* preceding *ayin*” order.<sup>25</sup> It was only due to the time that our ancestors spent in exile in Babylonia and were influenced by the other order there that the order in Hebrew became “*ayin* preceding *pe*,” the one we are familiar with today. This is the order reflected in the acrostics in the fifth book (chapters 111, 112, 119, and 145).<sup>26</sup>

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hand, the people were deliriously happy over the miraculous return. On the other hand, the lackluster response of the broader Jewish community tempered those feelings of joy, eliciting a prayer for complete restoration,” Angel, pp. 129-30. (R. Samet writes extensively about our psalm at pp. 360-389 in the work I cited above and that was only a brief summary. He adopts the “restoration of fortunes” interpretation in verse 1 and explains it well at pp. 383-34. He does not seem to adopt it in verse 4. See p. 386.)

It is possible that *Da’at Mikra*, R. Samet and the others are correct that the first three verses are a description of events that already occurred. Deciding between them and the view that all six verses describe events in the future is a close call. The purpose of this article is merely to introduce readers to the idiomatic expression that is present in both verses 1 and 4.

<sup>23</sup> For the view that it was composed in Eretz Yisrael, see, e.g., the Soncino edition of Psalms, p. 447: “[T]he writer of this Psalm will best be understood if we think of him as an exile recently back from Babylon...”

<sup>24</sup> See my *Esther Unmasked* (2015), pp. 207-230 (“The *Pe/Ayin* Order in Ancient Israel and Its Implications for the Book of *Tehillim*.”) Earlier than this, I had similar shorter articles in *Biblical Archaeology Review* (July-Aug. 2012) and *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 38 (2014).

<sup>25</sup> As do chapters 2-4 of the book of *Eikhab* and chapter 1 in its Dead Sea text.

<sup>26</sup> Psalms 34:16-18 makes much better sense assuming an original “*pe* preceding *ayin*” order. See, e.g., *Da’at Mikra* to Psalms 34:18, n. 9. There are other acrostics in the first book of Psalms and I address those in my writings.

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Tanakh tells us that in response to Cyrus’ initial permission in 539 BCE, approximately 42,000 Jews returned.<sup>27</sup> The widespread understanding is that the majority of Jews remained in exile.

Moreover, we are told at Ezra 3:12 that many who had seen the First Temple wept when the foundation for the new Temple was laid in the following year. The reason for the weeping is not stated in the verse, but almost certainly, it was due to sadness of the foundation’s small size.<sup>28</sup>

Now let us look at the words of the prophet Haggai at 2:3, which date to the second year of Darius, 520 BCE. Here the prophet declared that the people viewed the foundation that had been built so far as practically a “**nothing**.” Haggai then encouraged the people to start the work again, as it had ceased prior to this.<sup>29</sup> The people responded and eventually received permission from Darius. The Temple was subsequently completed in his sixth year.

As stated earlier, our preferred translation of verse 1 is, “when God will restore the fortunes of Tziyon, we will be like dreamers.” If our psalm is entirely a prayer for a future restoration of fortunes,<sup>30</sup> the psalm was authored in a period where there was hope for a restoration of Israel/Judea to its former glory, but the psalmist, standing in Eretz Yisrael, believed that the process had not yet begun or had only barely begun. It seems that Haggai, in the second year of Darius, is describing the type of period for which we are looking: a period where there was hope for a restoration of Israel/Judea to its former glory, but the people viewed that the process had not yet begun or had only barely begun.<sup>31</sup>

Moreover, the last two verses of our psalm refer to a hope for future joyful results from planting. This too seems to fit this period in Haggai,

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<sup>27</sup> See Ezra 2:64.

<sup>28</sup> See *Rashi*, *Metzudat David*, and the Soncino commentary on Ezra 3:12, and *Da’at Mikra* and the Soncino commentary on Haggai 2:3. See also Josephus’ amplification of this at *Antiquities XI*, iv.

<sup>29</sup> See Ezra 4:4-5 and 4:24.

<sup>30</sup> Admittedly, there is still an issue here, as I mentioned in an earlier note.

<sup>31</sup> For further background to this period, see the introductions to Haggai and Zechariah in the Soncino editions. The former has: “[T]he land had lain waste for over fifty years and there was a succession of bad seasons; drought and the failure of crops had impoverished and weakened the ardour of the community. Disillusionment was spreading and no further thought was given to the Temple.” Then along came Haggai with his words of encouragement to resume the work.

as there had been a prior extended drought and failure of crops.<sup>32</sup> I do not want to speculate further.

To sum up, although we cannot pinpoint the precise time of authorship of Psalm 126, we have made a major leap in understanding it. We now have the proper interpretation of verses 1 and 4 and can at least ask the right questions in our ultimate goal of understanding the background to this psalm. More importantly, we now understand verses 1 and 4 in our numerous recitals of them!

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One of the consequences of our preferred interpretation of verse 126:1 is that there is no longer a meaningful Biblical phrase “*shivat Tziyon*.” (Even if “*shivat*” was the original text, the meaning of the idiom is: “when God will restore the fortunes of Tziyon.” It would be misleading to quote only the second part of this expression.) I apologize to all those who consider themselves experts in this now non-existent field.<sup>33</sup> Also, if we advocate for the readings “*shevut*” or “*shevit*,” the tunes that we sing to our psalm may have to change, as these are both one-syllable words, in contrast to “*shivat*.”

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Finally, a brief note on why it should be acceptable in Orthodoxy to date parts of the book of Psalms to the early Second Temple period:

Although *Bava Batra* 14b attributes the book of Psalms to David and others who lived earlier than him, *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* 4:4 preserves the views of both Rav and R. Yoḥanan that Ezra was one of the ten figures involved in the composition of Psalms. A similar passage is found at *Kobelet Rabbah* 7:19. (See also the views of R. Akiva and R. Yose Ha-Gellili at *Pesahim* 117a regarding material in chapters 113-118.)

In the modern period, *Malbim* (intro. to Psalms) and *Da’at Mikra* (intro. to Psalms, pp. 13 and 47) accept that parts of Psalms date to the early Second Temple period. An early authority who took this position was Moses Gikatilla (11<sup>th</sup> century).

A commentary on most of Psalms discovered in the 1990s in a library in Russia is most likely that of Rashbam. This commentary is will-

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<sup>32</sup> See Haggai 1:10-11 and R. Samet, p. 379.


<sup>33</sup> That would include me. My MA paper at the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Yeshiva University involved a detailed study of the Persian kings who spanned the period 539-332 BCE. It became my first book: *Jewish History in Conflict: A Study of the Major Discrepancy Between Rabbinic and Conventional Chronology* (1997).



ing to accept that parts of Psalms date to the early Second Temple period. See, e.g., the comments to verses 106:3, 120:1, and 123:1 (found on the [alhatorah.org](http://alhatorah.org) site). There are similar comments on a few verses in the earlier chapters.

At Psalms 137:1 we have the phrase “*al naharot Bavel sham bakbinu.*”

For further reading on the above, see Hayyim Angel, *Vision from the Prophet and Counsel from the Elders* (2013), pp. 210-18.<sup>34</sup>

Note also that scholars have argued that the Hebrew of the fourth and fifth books of Psalms is later than that of the earlier books. See, in particular, Avi Hurvitz, *Bein Lashon le-Lashon* (1972).<sup>35</sup> 

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<sup>34</sup> See also the article by Etshalom mentioned earlier.

<sup>35</sup> I am grateful to Shawn Zelig Aster who pointed me to the work of Hurvitz many years ago. The title of this work refers to the two different stages of Biblical Hebrew.

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