

A SUGGESTED TRANSLATION OF PSALM 91:1-2

REUBEN M. KATZ

ישב בסתר עליון בצל שדי יתלונן [תה' צא, א']
(אמר לה' מחסי ומצודתי אל-הי אבטח בו [שם, ב']

The opening verse of Psalm 91 has been rendered in so many various ways in Bible translations and in *siddurim*, that one is hard-pressed to offer a translation one can agree would be true to the text. Those who struggle to find a subject and verb in the verse are forced to use a subordinate adjectival clause. Many other translations offer Verse 1 as a subordinate clause dependent on Verse 2 for the main subject of the verb. A few examples will suffice:

New Jewish Publication Society:

O, You who dwell in the shelter of the Most High and abide in the protection of Shaddai --

I say of the Lord, my refuge and stronghold, . . .

Birnbaum Siddur:

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High abides under the protection of the Almighty.

Soncino Psalms:

O Thou that dwellest in the covert of the Most High, and abidest in the shadow of the Almighty

ArtScroll Siddur:

Whoever sits in the refuge of the Most High, he shall dwell in the shadow of the Almighty.

I will say of HaShem, "He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, I will trust in Him.

Clearly, translations are indeed commentaries as well.

The *apparent* absence of an independent subject and verb in Verse 1 makes it necessary to consider it as a clause dependent on Verse 2. Translators search for a subject of the verb "ישב" [sits], and make "עליון" [(of the) Most High) a modifier of "סתר" [secret place, or a synonym of that term].

Reuben M. Katz, Rabbi Emeritus of Congregation B'nai Israel in Freeport, New York, is the author of Musings, a book of poetry in English and Hebrew. He is past National President of B'nai Zion and of the American Jewish League for Israel, and a veteran member of the World Zionist Organization and the Jewish Agency for Israel.

It is my belief, however, that Verse 1 does stand on its own as a complete and independent sentence. I base my approach on how Scripture describes God's presence as appearing out of His hiding place; man, seeking God's presence and protection, asks of Him to emerge from the darkness or the dark cloud or the shadows to be the petitioner's help. Frequently in the Psalms, God's dwelling place is described as beyond human eyes. At least five chapters of Psalms refer to the hiding of God's face (10:11, 13:2, 22:25, 27:9, 30:8). At least two others identify the place as secret, using the same terminology as Psalm 91:

ישת חשך סתרו סביבותיו סכתו . . .

He made darkness his screen . . . (18:12)

תסתירם בסתר פניך . . .

You shelter them in your [secret] pavilion . . . (31:21).

It would seem logical, then, to make "עליו" the subject of the verb "ישב" and "יִתְלוֹן" the subject of the verb "יִשָּׁדֵד". The Psalmist, seeking God's protection, declares, using accepted synonyms of referring to the Lord:

Verse 1: *Elyon, the Most High, dwells in secret places; Shaddai abides in the darkness.*

Seeking to draw God's presence out of the shadows and secret places, the Psalmist addresses Him:

Verse 2: *I say to Adonai, "You are my refuge, my fortress, my God in whom I trust." [I need you, come to my help.]*

Indeed, my translation is also a commentary.