

## *Shield of Abraham*

By: ELIYAHU KHANIN

The Biblical word גן is understood to mean an “enclosed garden,” though the very first garden in Tanakh, גן עדן, Paradise, is not surrounded by a wall or at least no wall is mentioned anywhere in the Creation story. Another word, מגן, shield, which is related to גן, implies a similar sort of protection by means of a physical barrier, and yet, as an epithet for God—for instance, in “Shield of Abraham”—it seems to be an unlikely metaphor for Divine protection. A protective physical barrier would imply that there is no control outside the protected area. In Tanakh, reliance on a physical barrier is disparaged as illustrated in the following verse:

If Hashem will not build the house, in vain	אם ה' לא יבנה בית שןא
do its builders labor on it; if Hashem will	עמלו בוניו בו אם ה' לא
not guard the city, in vain is the watchman	ישמר עיר שןא שקד
vigilant. <sup>1</sup>	שומר:

Instead of protection by means of a physical barrier, which separates a safe domain from an unsafe one, our tradition promotes the idea of Divine protection in which God controls both domains. How the alternative protection works can be inferred from the similarity between the concept of protection and the way meaning is delineated or delimited. Placing the protected domain all too easily behind a wall is tantamount to thinking in sharply defined categories taken from everyday experience. In Biblical Hebrew, however, most nouns can be traced back to an abstract verbal idea carried by the consonantal root. Understanding protection in terms of a physical barrier without first analyzing the verbal idea would therefore indicate an approach to meaning-making that is not characteristic of Biblical Hebrew. The very notion of Divine protection is an abstract idea and so is likely to reside at the level of the root that does not immediately refer to any ready-made concepts. Considering that the meaning of the root is

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<sup>1</sup> Psalms 127:1. Cf. also *Midrash Tanhuma, Sh'lakh* 6, quoted by Rashi on Numbers 13:18: “If they dwell in camps, they are mighty and depend upon their strength; but if they are in strongholds, they are weak and have fearful hearts.”

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not sharply delineated and often rather elusive, a closer reading is necessary in order to identify it and to understand how it is substantivized into a noun.

## Garden

The root of גן is גנן and its meaning can be inferred from the verse in Tanakh where its only *Qal* form appears:

Like flying birds, so will Hashem, Master of Legions, protect Jerusalem, protecting and rescuing, passing over and delivering.<sup>2</sup>

**RASHI: And delivering** — He will extricate Israel from the strait. This expression corresponds to *esmoucer* in Old French.

כְּצִפְרִים עָפוֹת כֵּן יִגֹּן ה'  
צָבָאוֹת עַל יְרוּשָׁלַם גְּנוֹן  
וְהַצִּיל פָּסַח וְהַמְלִיט:  
רש"י: והמליט — יוציא  
את ישראל מן הצרה לשון  
המלטה אישקמוצי"ר  
בלע"ז:

Protecting Jerusalem is compared to flying birds, but the implications of this metaphor are not immediately clear. It is followed by two pairs of infinitives, both consisting of one regular and one irregular infinitive vocalized as a finite verb. Let us start from the second pair featuring פסח, here meaning “sparing,” and המליט, meaning “causing to flee.” The infinitives are coordinated: a person has to be spared before he can be caused to flee. Rashi explains that the meaning of המליט is evident in the Old French verb *esmoucer*. While *moucer* means “to cover,” *esmoucer* with prefixed *es* (*ex-*, i.e., “out”) does not appear in major Old French dictionaries. Nevertheless, it seems that *esmoucer* means “to take cover,” especially because Rashi cites it elsewhere. Rashi’s point is that המליט refers to taking cover inside rather than escaping outside, as the verb is usually translated. To prove this, let us look at another instance of the same verb explained by Rashi using *esmoucer*:

Before she even feels her labor pains she will give birth; before any travail come to her she will deliver [וְהַמְלִיטָה] a son!<sup>3</sup>

**RASHI: Before she even feels her labor pains** — When Zion has not yet travailed with birth pangs, she has borne her children; that is to say that her children will gather into her midst, which was desolate and bereft of them, and it is as though she

בְּטָרַם תְּחִיל יִלְדָה  
בְּטָרַם יָבֹא חֶבְלֵי לָהּ  
וְהַמְלִיטָה זָכָר:  
רש"י: בטרם תחיל —  
ציון חיל היולדת ילדה את  
בניה כלומר יתקבצו בניה  
לתוכה אשר היתה שוממה  
מהם ושכולה והרי הוא  
כאילו ילדתו עכשיו בלא

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 31:5.

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 66:7.

bore them now without birth pangs, for all the nations will bring them into her midst. **She will deliver a son** — Any emerging of an embedded [literally: swallowed] thing is called המלטה. [The verb] והמליטה corresponds to *esmoucer* in Old French.

חבלי יולדה כי כל העכו"ם  
יביאום לתוכה: והמליטה  
זכר — כל יציאת דבר  
בלוע קרוי המלטה  
והמליטה אישקמוציי"ר  
בלע"ז:

Concerning the issue of inside and outside, Rashi's explanation is rather unexpected. The verse speaks of bringing Zion's children into her midst, i.e., inside, by leaving the nations which are outside. This process is metaphorically called "giving birth," despite the fact that the movement is from the outside to the inside. To emphasize this, Rashi cites the Old French *esmoucer*, i.e., "to take cover." His explanation will be clearer if we consider some relevant circumstances: When someone who is "swallowed" escapes outside, his escape will look more like taking cover in a shelter due to presumably poor conditions while being "swallowed." In the verse, Jews were "swallowed" by the surrounding nations that bring them back to Zion, as if to a shelter. Metaphorically, this is compared to giving birth by Zion. In reality, however, Zion becomes pregnant again, as it were. Rashi's explanation leaves no doubt that the verb המליטה denotes the movement from the outside to the inside and *esmoucer* is cited to strengthen that definition. Considering that the preceding infinitive פסח means "sparing," it speaks of fleeing inside, apparently to Jerusalem, which God promises to protect.

Back to the first pair of infinitives, גנון והציל. The infinitive הציל implies surviving without fleeing.<sup>4</sup> Whatever the preceding infinitive גנון means, the first pair speaks of a static situation. To fit together the pieces of the puzzle, let us consider the bird metaphor at the beginning of the verse. When in danger, birds flee to their nest built in an inaccessible location. Its protection is circumstantial rather than physical: nests are built to not interest predators. Jerusalem is not a nest but, like a nest, it enjoys circumstantial protection when potential invaders are busy with their own affairs or otherwise. This gives a clue to the meaning of גנון. Being parallel to פסח in the first pair of infinitives, גנון conveys a condition for the following הציל, i.e., something like "maintaining protective environment." Thus, the verse says the following:

Jerusalem will be [like a bird's nest] protected [יגן]	כְּצִפְרִים עֲפוֹת כֵּן
by God who will save it [הציל] through maintaining	יִגֵּן ה' צְבָאוֹת עַל
its inaccessibility for the enemies [גנון] and will	יְרוּשָׁלַם גְּנוֹן

<sup>4</sup> Cf. ותנצל נפשי, Genesis 32:31.

spare those outside [פסח] and cause them to take	והציל פסח
cover [המליט] in Jerusalem [like birds] flying [to	והמליט:
their nest].	

This meaning of גנון suggests that the garden, גן, itself protects, rather than it has to be protected with a surrounding wall. Like a bird's nest in the above metaphor, the garden is inaccessible to what it protects against, in particular, the parching heat of the sun. The foliage provides a natural barrier weakening and dispersing the sunlight: gardens (or oases) are meant to provide a refuge for environments where human life would otherwise be impossible.<sup>5</sup> That is the rationale for the Paradise [גן עדן]. Delicious and attractive fruits are a nice bonus that do not, however, turn it into an enclosed plantation for growing crops.

### Shield

Though the noun מגן [shield] and the root גנן are related, it is grammatically impossible to derive the former from the latter, because the vocalization of מגן is not attested in the derivatives of the ל"ל roots (i.e., roots with a duplicate last consonant). Considering that the vocalization of מגן is quite common in nouns or participles derived from the regular roots, e.g., מַגֵּן, מַגֵּן, the מ in מגן can only be a part of the root. Incidentally, a *pi'el* verb מגן appears virtually next to the first instance of the noun מגן in Tanakh and it seems reasonable to assume that they are related:

...and blessed be God, the Most High,	וברוך אל עליון אשר מגן
who has delivered [מגן] your foes into	צריכה בידו ויתן לו מעשר
your hand; and he gave [וייתן] him a tenth	מפל:
of everything. <sup>6</sup>	

Some time later, the word of Hashem	אמר הדברים האלה, הנה
came to Abram in a vision: "Fear not,	דבר ה' אל אברם, במחזה,
Abram, I am a shield [מגן] to you; Your	לאמר: אל תירא אברם,
reward shall be very great." <sup>7</sup>	אנכי מגן לך--שכרה, הרבה
	מאד.

There are two more instances of the verb in Tanakh:

How can I hand you over [אֶתְנֶה],	איך אֶתְנֶה אֶפְרַיִם אֶמְגִּן
Ephraim, or deliver [אֶמְגִּן] you, Israel?	יִשְׂרָאֵל אִיךְ אֶתְנֶה כְּאֶדְמָה

<sup>5</sup> Cf. the clouds of glory, ענני הכבוד, in the desert.

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 14:20.

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 15:1

How can I render you like Admah [or] make you like Zeboim? My heart has been overturned; My mercies have been kindled together.<sup>8</sup>

אֲשִׁימָךְ כְּצִבְאִים נִהְפֵּךְ עָלַי  
לִבִּי יִסָּד נִקְמְרוּ נְחוּמָי:

It will set [תִּתֵּן] an adornment of grace upon your head; it will bestow [תִּמְגֶנֶךָ] a crown of splendor upon you.<sup>9</sup>

תִּתֵּן לְרֵאשִׁיךָ לְוִיַּת חֵן עֲטָרַת  
תִּמְגֶנֶךָ תִּמְגֶנֶךָ:

Both of these instances are parallel to the verb נתן [to give], while the preceding one is more loosely coordinated with נתן in the next clause. Based on these verses, the rough meaning of the verb is “to make available,” “to provide” for the benefit of the recipient. Thus, Abraham’s adversaries are delivered into his hand, Jews are not delivered to their enemies, a crown is provided with entitlement to its wearer. How this translates into the notion of shield may be not immediately apparent, unless one takes into account that the shields mentioned in Tanakh were more sophisticated than a mere physical barrier. In particular, the shields were greased to deflect weapons. As follows from the following verse and Rashi’s explanation, an ungreased shield would effectively be a mere physical barrier and considered a disadvantage, to say the least.

Setting the table, lighting the candelabrum, eating and drinking, Arise, O officers; anoint the shield.<sup>10</sup>

**RASHI: Anoint the shield** — They were shields of boiled leather, and they would grease them with oil so that the weapons would glide off. The same is mentioned concerning Saul: “For there the shield of the mighty was rejected.”<sup>11</sup> It rejected its grease and did not absorb it, and Saul’s shield became as though it was not greased with oil.

עֲרֹךְ הַשְּׁלֵחָן צַפֵּה הַצִּפּוֹת  
אֲכוּל וְשָׁתָה קוּמוּ הַשָּׂרִים  
מִשְׁחוּ מִגָּן:

**רש"י: משחו מגן** — מגיני  
עור שלוק הן ומושחין אותן  
בשמן כדי שיחליק את הזיין  
וכך נאמר בשאול כי שם  
נגעל מגן גבורים פלט את  
מישחתו ולא קיבלה ונעשה  
מגן שאול כאילו לא נמשה  
בשמן:

The shield handles weapons in much the same way as the garden handles the parching heat of the sun. Technically, the shield must prevent weapons from hitting its owner, but from the perspective of the owner, his shield ensures his survival. As a physical barrier, the shield is a relatively small device, offering only partial protection and so, ultimately, it is

<sup>8</sup> Hosea 11:8.

<sup>9</sup> Proverbs 4:9.

<sup>10</sup> Isaiah 21:5.

<sup>11</sup> II Samuel 1:21.

of little use. That is why it was so important to have a shield that deflects incoming weapons, thereby providing [מגן] invulnerability to its owner, rather than one that merely protects a small area of the body. Similarly, the garden is not a place to merely unwind but rather, the only viable possibility to survive: no life is possible outside it. Thus, when God says that He is a “shield” to Abraham, it is much more about giving him something positive than protecting him from something negative:

After these events, the word of Hashem came to Abram in a vision, saying, “Fear not, Abram, I am a shield [מגן] for you; your reward is very great.”<sup>12</sup>

**RASHI: After these events** — Wherever אחר is used, it signifies immediately after the preceding event; whilst אחרי signifies a long time afterwards. “After these events” means: after this miracle has been wrought for him in that he slew the kings and he was in great anxiety, saying, “Perhaps I have already received, in this God-given victory, reward for all my good deeds” — therefore the Omnipresent said to him, “Fear not, Abram, I am thy shield against punishment, for you shall not be punished on account of all these people whom you have slain. And as for your being anxious regarding the receipt of any further reward, know that thy reward will be exceeding great.”<sup>13</sup>

אחר הנקרים האלה קנה  
דבר ה' אל אברם במחנה  
לאמר אל תירא אברם אנכי  
מגן לך שכרך הרבה מאד:  
**רש"י: אחר הדברים**  
**האלה** — כל מקום  
שנאמר אחר סמוך, אחרי  
מופלג. אחר שנעשה לו  
נס זה שהרג את המלכים  
והיה דואג ואומר שמא  
קבלתי שכר על כל  
צדקותי, לכך אמר לו  
המקום אל תירא אברם  
אנכי מגן לך מן העונש  
שלא תענש על כל אותן  
נפשות שהרגת, ומה  
שאתה דואג על קבול  
שכרך, שכרך הרבה מאד:

To keep the symbolism of the shield, Rashi construes it as protection against punishment that Abraham may have feared. Receiving reward is viewed as a separate matter. Considering, however, that reward and punishment come from the same source, מגן as a participle meaning “providing,” “making available” can accommodate both. Everything that comes upon Abraham comes from God, Who knows the overall balance of reward and punishment, so that Abraham’s reward will not be jeopardized. Thus, מגן with reference to God implies providing everything one receives, both positive and negative, while keeping an overall positive balance. This is much like the garden that filters out excessive heat and lets through just enough sunlight.

<sup>12</sup> Genesis 15:1.

<sup>13</sup> Genesis Rabbah 44:5.

## Shield of David

Another instance of the epithet מגן, which appears in connection with King David, provides an opportunity to confirm the above understanding. The blessing of the Patriarchs, which concludes with “Shield of Abraham,” mentions, among other things, the promise to bring a redeemer to Abraham’s descendants:

...and brings a Redeemer to their children’s children, for His Name’s sake, with love. O King, Helper, Savior, and Shield. <sup>14</sup> Blessed are You, Hashem, Shield of Abraham.	...ומביא גואל לבני בניהם למען שמו באהבה מלך עוזר ומושיע ומגן. ברוך אתה ה' מגן אברהם:
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Ultimately, the redeemer must descend from David. It is hardly a coincidence that David too is associated with מגן, specifically in the blessing after the Haftarah that ends with מגן דוד, Shield of David. The Gemara teaches that this epithet is based on God’s words that He gave David a great name:

Rabbah bar Sheila said: [While a blessing] in the prayer concludes with “He Who causes the horn of salvation to flourish,” the blessing after the Haftarah concludes with “Shield of David.” And I gave you great renown, like the renown of the great men of the world.” Rav Yosef teaches: hence it is said, Shield of David. <sup>15</sup>	אמר רבה בר שילא: דצלותא מצמיח קרן ישועה, דאפטרתא מגן דוד. ועשיתי לך שם גדול כשם הגדלים, תני רב יוסף: זהו שאומרים מגן דוד:
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In the verse quoted in the Gemara and used by Rav Yosef as a proof-text for the epithet “Shield of David,” giving David a great name is accompanied by cutting down his enemies:

I was with you wherever you went—I cut down all your enemies before you and I gave you great renown, like the renown of the great men of the world. <sup>16</sup>	ואהיה עמך בכל אשר הלכת ואכרתה את כל איבך מפניך ועשתי לך שם גדול כשם הגדלים אשר בארץ:
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There is a striking correspondence between this and the promise to Abraham above, in which מגן is mentioned. Both Abraham and David

<sup>14</sup> Note that מגן appears in the blessing even before מגן אברהם in a group of participles and so is unlikely to denote a piece of military equipment.

<sup>15</sup> *bPesahim* 117b.

<sup>16</sup> II Samuel 7:9.

were given a great name<sup>17</sup> and both personally fought their enemies which potentially could have diminished or even canceled their chances to see that come true. When the uncertainty becomes an issue, the epithet מגן is used. In the case of David, God promises him that the Messiah will be of his lineage. This is, actually, what the blessing after the Haftarah is about:

<p>Gladden us, Hashem, our God, with Elijah the prophet, Your servant, and with the kingdom of the House of David, Your anointed, may he come speedily and cause our heart to exult. On his throne let no stranger sit nor let others continue to inherit his honor, for by Your holy Name You swore to him that his lamp will not be extinguished forever and ever. Blessed are You, Hashem, Shield of David.</p>	<p>שְׂמַחְנוּ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ בְּאַלְיָהוּ הַנְּבִיאַ עֵיזֵק וּבְמַלְכוּת בֵּית דָּוִד מִשִּׁיקָהּ. בְּמַהֲרָה יָבֹוא וְיַגְלֵל לְבָנּוּ. עַל כִּסְאוֹ לֹא יֵשֵׁב זָר וְלֹא יִנְחֲלוּ עוֹד אֲחֵרִים אֶת כְּבוֹדוֹ. כִּי בְשֵׁם קִדְשֶׁךָ נִשְׁבַּעְתָּ לוֹ שֶׁלֹא יִכָּבֵה נֵרוֹ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד: בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' מְגִן דָּוִד:</p>
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Elsewhere, the tradition indirectly confirms the similarity of מגן and גן, comparing Abraham and David, both of whom enjoyed having God as their “shield” [מגן], as it were, with Adam, who enjoyed the spiritual light in the Garden of Eden [גן עדן]. According to Midrash, Abraham was worthy to have been created before Adam,<sup>18</sup> while David received his seventy years of life from Adam who was supposed to live a thousand years but lived seventy years less.<sup>19</sup> ❧

<sup>17</sup> The promise to Abraham is given in Gen 12:2. Cf. also Alsheich on II Sam 7:9, “And I will make you a great name like that of the greatest men on earth.” They are the Forefathers, since according to the Sages we say “Shield of David” just as we say “Shield of the Forefathers.”

<sup>18</sup> Genesis Rabbah 14:6.

<sup>19</sup> Numbers Rabbah, *Naso* 14:12.