TEHILIM Psalm 19: Who protects us from solar radiation?

1. Psalm of David
2. The heavens bear witness to the Glory [= existence, presence] of God, and the firmament declares the work of his hands.
3. Day after day they bear witness of His command, night after night they announce His wisdom.
4. There is no utterance, no words, their voices are not heard
5. [Yet] their testimony resounds through all the earth, and their words to the ends of the planet. "For the sun, He [the Creator] set a tent for them."
6. [the sun] like a groom from his wedding canopy [=huppa] comes, like a warrior running his course.
7. Going out from the ends of heaven, and its circuit to their ends end, nothing escapes its heat.

This Mizmor, Tehillim 19, is recited every Shabbat morning as part of our weekly Tefila. Composed by David, King of Israel, this Psalm explores two issues. The heavens and the Tora. Of the 16 verses of this psalm, 6 are dedicated to "heavens" (2-7), and 8 (8-16) to "the Tora". (This Mizmor is so beautiful and profound that I can not devote the attention it deserves in a single email. Today we will only study the first part).

Of the six verses devoted to heaven, three are dedicated to heaven itself, and three, specifically the sun.
King David says the heavens are a testimony of the existence of God (pasuq / verse 2). This means that when we observe heavens, the magnificence of the universe, its perfect harmony, the planets' and the stars' movements, we perceive that the Cosmos is a intelligently organized structure. It has a design. We do not see chaos but predictability. The universe would not work as it works just randomly, without Anyone in charge of it.

The celestial testimony is not only oral but visual (pasuq 3). This testimony is an invitation to discover the Designer behind the design. King David (pasuq 4) noticed something that I think most of us do not. The heavens, all the planetary and celestial motions, the rotation of the earth, etc. do not generate a deafening noise, as you might expect (or perhaps that permanent background noise is what we perceive as "silence" …). Either way, King David used this literary motif to emphasize that without words, the heavens declare the existence of God, for whoever wants to "listen".

In the next pesuqim 5, 6, 7, our Psalm continues to refer to the heavens, but particularly to the sun. It is important for David HaMelekh to speak of the sun as a mere witness of the existence of the Creator, since for virtually all civilizations of antiquity, the sun was seen as a god. In this Psalm, David ascribes to the sun all its importance, although no more than a divine "instrument". It is not a deity, it has no independent power, but a witness of the true God. HaShem is the One that makes the sun to rise every morning, and its energy (= heat, verse 7) to reach the remotest corners of Earth [="nothing escapes its heat"]. Today we know that the darkest places of our planet, the depths of the oceans, could not have sustained life without solar energy, although this energy gets there indirectly.

One more point about the way this Psalm describes the sun, which I find fascinating. There is an expression in pasuq 5, the first reference to the sun, which at first seems confusing. "For the sun, He [the Creator] set a tent for them."

What is the meaning of "tent" and who is "them"?

Two thousand years ago, our rabbis explained that this "tent" refers to a special protection provided by the Creator. The Sages of the Midrash (Bereshit Rabba 6: 6) called this protection "nartiq" (sheath, cover) and explained that in this Psalm is called "tent" (or tent, in Hebrew □□□) because, like a tent in the desert the nartiq's function is to protect those who live under the it against the sun's rays.
They also said that the word "for them" should be understood

as “for their own good”, that is, for the sake of human beings, living under the sun. In other words, the rabbis explained this pasuq as: “God covered the sun with a tent [a layer, a screen] for the sake of the people who inhabit this world.”

Rabbi Yehoshua bar Abin, a rabbi of the second century, said that without this protection, direct sunlight would burn human beings.

Did our Hakhamim, or David HaMelech, know of the existence of an invisible shield (ozone, atmosphere, etc.) that protects us, filtering out the devastating ultraviolet sun’s rays, gamma rays, X-rays, etc.? It looks like they did….

Rabbi Yehoshua bar Abin also said that humans will eventually realize –by looking at the sun and understanding how dangerous it would be if the Creator had not contained it with an “invisible shield”– the wisdom and compassion of Creator of the World. We will understand then that there is not just “something” but “SomeOne” who protects us, and allows us to live. At that time, once again, the heavens will become a testimony of the existence of the Creator.