

Mizmor 023

A Shepherd's Tale

Key Concepts

David gratefully looks back on his life, recalling his relationship to Hashem in each of three major periods: (1) David fondly recalls his idyllic youth as a shepherd, watching his father's flocks. Life was simple then and while out alone on the pastures David felt especially close to Hashem. (2) After David was anointed king he had to contend with the resentment of Shaul as well as wars with other nations. However, his bitachon remained firm throughout. He continued to see himself as a humble lamb, trusting that Hashem would lead him in the right path. (3) Once David's kingdom was consolidated, he was granted the wealth and power of royalty. But at heart he remained a simple shepherd and his only ambition was to serve Hashem in tranquility.

Navigating Tehillim (1). Whereas Mizmor 022 draws our attention to the transition from a tragic present to an optimistic future signaled by the morning star, Mizmor 023 reminds us to make a happy present even more meaningful by recalling a treasured time in the past.

Navigating Tehillim (2). Mizmor 022 also teaches us the virtue of looking back over one's life to draw wisdom from one's experiences. Thus, David used Mizmor 018 to conduct a more extended review for the benefit of future generations. He showed how his entire life was dominated by his relationship to Hashem. No matter what he achieved, whether it was escape from danger, defeat of enemies, or rising to royalty and the leadership of a nation, it was all Hashem's doing.

Exploring the Mizmor

PART 1. THE INNOCENT SHEPHERD. David begins by recalling the happiness of his youth as a shepherd. Remembering that time, David visualizes himself as a lamb under Hashem's care. The lamb has total trust that the Shepherd will see to all his needs. He does not have to be concerned about potential dangers or difficult decisions.

(א) מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד ה' רֵעִי לֹא אֶחְסֵר: (ב) בְּנֵאוֹת דְּשֵׂא יִרְבִּיצֵנִי עַל מֵי מִנְחוֹת יִנְהַלֵּנִי:
 (1) A mizmor by David. Hashem is my Shepherd I will not lack. (2) He lays me down in [shelters near the] grassy meadows. He leads me beside tranquil waters.

PART 2. OUT INTO THE WORLD. The setting shifts and David sees himself as no longer a lamb in an idyllic pasture but as a grown man facing harsh reality. He was now required to face the challenges of a complex life, including the resentment of Shaul and his supporters, gaining recognition as the newly anointed king, and conducting wars with other nations. And so David is moved to speak directly to Hashem and to thank Him for His help in adversity.

(ג) נַפְשִׁי יִשׁוּבֵב יִנְחֵנִי בְּמַעְגְלֵי צְדָק לְמַעַן שְׁמוֹ: (ד) גַּם כִּי אֵלֶּךְ בְּגִיא צַלְמוֹת לֹא אִירָא רָע כִּי אַתָּה עִמָּדִי שִׁבְטֶךָ וּמִשְׁעֲנֵתֶךָ הִמָּה יִנְחַמֵּנִי:
 (3) He restores my soul. He leads me on righteous pathways for His Name's sake. (4) "[Hashem,] even when I go into the valley of death's shadow, I will not fear evil for You are with me. Your rod and Your staff comfort me."

PART 3. THE TRAPPINGS OF SUCCESS. David gives thanks to Hashem for his worldly success, but he remains at heart a humble servant of Hashem. He concludes with a plea that he be allowed to devote himself to serving Hashem in tranquility.

(ה) תַּעֲרֹךְ לִפְנֵי שִׁלְחֹן נֶגֶד צַרְרֵי דְשִׁנְתָּ בְּשִׁמּוֹן רֹאשִׁי כּוֹסֵי רִוְיָה: (ו) אֵךְ טוֹב וְחֶסֶד יִרְדְּפוּנִי כָּל יְמֵי חַיֵּי וְשִׁבְתִּי בְּבַיִת ה' לְאֲרָךְ יָמִים:
 (5) You set out a table before me despite my tormentors. You have anointed my head with oil; my cup is full. (6) But may goodness and kindness pursue me all the days of my life and let me dwell in the House of Hashem, for the length of [my] days.

Additional Thoughts

In Mizmor 023 David recreates his fond memories of being a simple shepherd in remote pastures. There would come a time when he had to give up the pastoral life and face the challenges of a complex world. However, he always treasured the experience of those early years spent in happy solitude, a time when he learned how to be alone with Hashem. He was able to draw on that happy experience of closeness

to Hashem throughout his life.

It is significant that we joyfully sing this mizmor every week at *Shalosh Seudos* because that is a time when we look back fondly at the *kedushah* we have experienced over the previous 24 hours. The mizmor helps us intensify that feeling and reminds to draw upon it over the course of the next six days.

Learning the Mizmor

PART 1. THE SHEPHERD.

(א) מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד

This song is a **mizmor** composed **by David**.

ה' רְעִי לֹא אֶחָסֵר:

I visualize myself as a lamb and **Hashem is my Shepherd** — ה' רְעִי. Because I have complete trust in Him I am happy to be in His care and I am confident that **I will not lack** — לֹא אֶחָסֵר for anything. Hashem brings me to lush pastures to graze in the mornings and evenings when the air is pleasant.

(ב) בְּנֵאוֹת דְּשָׂא יִרְבִּיצֵנִי

Then, in the heat of the day when it is time to rest **He lets me lie me down in** shelters that are near the **grassy meadows** — בְּנֵאוֹת דְּשָׂא יִרְבִּיצֵנִי to spare me the arduous effort of a long trek.

עַל מֵי מְנַחוֹת יִנְהַלֵּנִי:

When I am thirsty **He leads me beside tranquil waters** — עַל מֵי מְנַחוֹת יִנְהַלֵּנִי so that I am not disturbed by the turbulence of a rushing stream.

PART 2. OUT INTO THE WORLD.

(ג) נִפְּשֵׁי יִשׁוּבֵב

יִנְחֵנִי בְּמַעְגְּלֵי צְדָק לְמַעַן שְׁמוֹ:

When I am desperately fleeing my enemies, **He** revives my energies and **restores my soul** — נִפְּשֵׁי יִשׁוּבֵב. **He leads me on righteous pathways** — יִנְחֵנִי בְּמַעְגְּלֵי צְדָק so that by following His guidance I am able to avoid sinful and self-destructive behavior. It is all **for His Name's sake** — לְמַעַן שְׁמוֹ because His Name is compassion and love.

(ד) גַם כִּי אֵלֶיךָ בְּגִיּא צַלְמוֹת
לֹא אִירָא רָע כִּי אַתָּה עֹמְדִי

Hashem, **even when I must go** — גַם כִּי אֵלֶיךָ where I am subject to temptation and my very soul is at risk **in the valley of death's shadow** — בְּגִיּא צַלְמוֹת, **I will not fear** being drawn into **evil** — לֹא אִירָא רָע, **for I know that You are with me** — כִּי אַתָּה עֹמְדִי and will help me do what is right.

שְׁבֻטְךָ וּמִשְׁעֲנֵתְךָ הִפְּמָה יִנְחַמְנִי:

In the past **Your rod** — שְׁבֻטְךָ has guided me, as the rod of the shepherd guides his flock. **Your staff** — וּמִשְׁעֲנֵתְךָ has supported me as the staff of the shepherd supports him while he walks along. Together, **they comfort me** — הִפְּמָה יִנְחַמְנִי and give me confidence that I will survive my future travails.

PART 3. THE TRAPPINGS OF SUCCESS.

(ה) תַּעֲרֹךְ לִפְנֵי שַׁלְחֹן נִגַּד צָרְרִי
דִּשְׁנֵת בְּשֶׁמֶן רֹאשִׁי
כּוֹסֵי רוּיָה:

Although I have not sought wealth and honor You have anointed me and established my kingdom. **You set out a full table before me** — תַּעֲרֹךְ לִפְנֵי שַׁלְחֹן **despite my tormentors** — נִגַּד צָרְרִי, who wanted to destroy me. **You have anointed my head with oil** — דִּשְׁנֵת בְּשֶׁמֶן רֹאשִׁי; **my cup of success is full** — כּוֹסֵי רוּיָה. My lot in life is much more than I deserve.

(ו) אֲךָ טוֹב וְחֶסֶד יִרְדְּפוּנִי
כָּל יְמֵי חַיִּי

But — אֲךָ despite my worldly success, I aspire only to spiritual serenity and closeness to You, Hashem, as I experienced in the days of my youth. **May goodness and kindness pursue me all the days of my life** — טוֹב וְחֶסֶד יִרְדְּפוּנִי — כָּל יְמֵי חַיִּי. Let virtuous behavior come naturally to me so that it will seem that my good qualities are pursuing me.

וּשְׁבִתִּי בְּבֵית ה'
לְאַרְךָ יָמִים:

And let me dwell in your House, the House of Hashem — וּשְׁבִתִּי בְּבֵית ה',

learning Your Torah and doing Your will, **throughout the length of my days** —
לְאֶרְךָ יָמַי.

Living the Mizmor

Listed below are some of the thoughts that you might have in mind when you say or sing the words of the mizmor as a *tefillah*.

Tefillos for Life - Your Relationship with Hashem .

[23:1] SHEPHERD. – ה' רֵעִי לֹא אֶחָסֵר – “*Hashem is my Shepherd I will not lack.*” Think of Hashem as your shepherd Who provides for all your needs.

[23:4] CONTINUING PRESENCE. – לֹא אֵיכָא רָע כִּי אֶתָּה עִמָּדִי – “*I will not fear evil for You are with me.*” Remember that Hashem is always with you.

Tefillos for Life - Your Gratitude.

[23:2] TRANQUILITY. – עַל מֵי מְנַחֵת יְנַהֲלֵנִי – “*He leads me beside tranquil waters.*” Be grateful that you are leading a relatively tranquil life.

[23:3] GUIDANCE. – יְנַחֲנִי בְּמַעְגְּלֵי צְדָק – “*He leads me on righteous pathways.*” Be grateful that Hashem has given you the Torah and talmidei chachamim to interpret it.

[23:5] WORLDLY SUCCESS. – תַּעֲרֹךְ לִפְנֵי שִׁלְחֹן – “*You set out a table before me.*” Give thanks to Hashem for your worldly success.

[23:5] YOUR MISSION. – דִּשַׁנָּת בְּשֶׁמֶן רִאשִׁי כּוֹסֵי רוּיָה – “*You have anointed my head with oil; my cup is full.*” Give thanks to Hashem for giving you a mission in life and giving you the means to fulfill it.

Tefillos for Life - Your Teshuvah.

[23:6] MIDDOS. – אֵךְ טוֹב וְחֶסֶד יִרְדְּפוּנִי כָּל יְמֵי חַיֵּי – “*But may goodness and kindness pursue me all the days of my life.*” Ask Hashem to help you perfect your *middos* so that virtuous behavior will come naturally to you.

[23:6] DWELLING. – וְשִׁבְתִּי בְּבֵית ה' לְאֶרְךָ יָמַי – “*and let me dwell in the House of Hashem, for the length of [my] days.*” Ask Hashem for the privilege of learning Torah and doing His will.

Sources

The primary sources used in the interpretation of the verses of this mizmor are listed below.

ד - המאירי, ספורנו, אבן יחיאל, באר אברהם
ה - רש"י, המאירי, אבן יחיאל, מלבי"ם
ו - רד"ק, המאירי, ספורנו, מצודות, מלבי"ם

א - אבן עזרא, אבן יחיאל, מלבי"ם
ב - רד"ק, המאירי, ספורנו, אבן יחיאל, מצודות,
באר אברהם
ג - רש"י, ספורנו, אבן יחיאל, מצודות

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