

Mizmor 038

A Tefillah for Recovery

Key Concepts

In Mizmor 038 David calls to mind a time when he suffered from a severe illness. David composed the mizmor as a *tefillah* by which any individual who is suffering from illness or other travail can plead with Hashem for recovery. The form of the *tefillah* reminds the person to consider how his own sins may have contributed to his illness. Thus, the key to recovery is spiritual self-examination and teshuvah.

The mizmor reviews many of the ways in which a person might be afflicted by illness and also looks at how such afflictions affect those around him — his close friends and his enemies. The conclusion to be drawn is that a person's most authentic relationship is with Hashem. And it is Hashem Who is the only true source of yeshuah.

Mizmor 038 is one of the many in which we are given the opportunity to put human suffering in context. Even in times of our greatest joy we are required to face our own weaknesses and the need for some degree of suffering. In fact, unrestrained joy can bring out the worst in people, whereas suffering reminds us that we have not been placed in this world merely for our own pleasure. The message of the mizmor is that suffering builds our moral strength and keeps us from sin. If we take this lesson to heart we can sincerely appeal to Hashem to heal our afflictions, whatever they may happen to be.

Navigating Tehillim. This mizmor calls to mind Mizmor 006 in which David also spoke of a life-threatening affliction. In that earlier instance he emphasized the harm caused by the ill-will of his enemies and yet he looked for the opportunity to forgive them. In the current mizmor he gives extra thought to how his own sins may have contributed to his illness.

Exploring the Mizmor

PART 1. MEMORY OF SUFFERING. David begins the mizmor by acknowledging that his own sins are the cause of his suffering. Nevertheless he pleads with Hashem to be gentle with him and help him recover.

(א) מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד לְהִזְכִּיר: (ב) ה' אֵל בְּקִצְפֶּךָ תוֹכִיחַנִי וּבְחַמְתֶּךָ תִּסְרְנֵנִי: (ג) כִּי חָצִיף

נִחַתוּ בִּי וַתִּנְחַת עָלַי יְדָדָּה: (ד) אִין מִתִּם בְּבִשְׂרֵי מִפְּנֵי זַעֲמָדָה אִין שְׁלוֹם בְּעֲצָמַי מִפְּנֵי
חֲטָאתִי: (ה) כִּי עֹנֵתִי עֲבָרוּ רֵאשֵׁי כְּמִשְׁאֵה כְּבִד וַיִּכְבְּדוּ מִמֶּנִּי: (ו) הַבְּאִישׁוֹ נִמְקוּ
חַבּוּרָתִי מִפְּנֵי אֲוִלְתִּי: (ז) נִעְוִיתִי שַׁחֲתִי עַד מְאֹד כָּל הַיּוֹם קִדְר הַלְכָתִי: (ח) כִּי כֶסֶלִי
מָלְאוּ נִקְלָה וְאִין מִתִּם בְּבִשְׂרֵי:

(1) *By David, to call to mind [a severe illness]. (2) Hashem, do not rebuke me in Your anger nor chastise me in Your fury. (3) . For Your arrows have been shot down into me and Your hand has come down upon me. (4) There is no whole place on my body because of Your rage, no soundness of limbs because of my offense. (5) For my sins have risen over my head. Like a heavy load, they are too heavy for me. (6) My sores have festered and dissolved because of my weakness. (7) I am bent and very stooped over. All day long I go about in a black depression. (8) For my innards are filled with burning and there is no whole place on my body.*

PART 2. A CRY OF PAIN. David looks into himself and sees how his suffering has affected his ability to pray to Hashem.

(ט) נִפְוֹגוּתִי וְנִדְכִיתִי עַד מְאֹד שְׂאֵגְתִי מִנְהַמַּת לִבִּי: (י) אֲדַנִּי נִגְדָּדָה כָּל תַּאֲוֹתַי
וְאֲנַחְתִּי מִמֶּדָּה לֹא נִסְתָּרָה: (יא) לִבִּי סָחַרְחַר עֲזָבֵנִי כַחֵי וְאוֹר עֵינָי גַּם הֵם אִין אֶתִּי:
(9) *I have grown faint and utterly weak [but] I will cry out in the convulsion of my heart. (10) My Lord, before You is all my aspiration. My sighing is not concealed from You. (11) You see that my mind is spinning. My strength has failed me. Even the light of my eyes is gone from me.*

PART 3. FRIENDS AND ENEMIES. David examines the effect of his afflictions on his relationships to other people — friends and enemies. Those who were close to him are now uncomfortable in his presence. Those who resented him see the opportunity to rejoice in his travail.

(יב) אֶהְבִּי וְרַעֵי מִנְּגִד נִגְעֵי יַעֲמָדוּ וַיִּקְרֹבוּ מִרְחֹק עֲמָדוּ: (יג) וַיִּנְקְשׁוּ מִבִּקְשֵׁי נַפְשִׁי
וְדַרְשֵׁי רָעֵתִי דָּבְרוּ הוֹוֹת וּמְרִמוֹת כָּל הַיּוֹם יְהִגּוּ:
(12) *My friends and companions stand aloof from my affliction and my intimates stand at a distance. (13) The seekers of my life lay traps; those who seek my harm speak treacheries. They contemplate deceit all day long.*

PART 4. NO DEFENSE. David has accepted the justice of his fate and declines the opportunity to defend himself against the rebuke and slander of his enemies.

(יד) וְאֲנִי כְחֹרֵשׁ לֹא אֶשְׁמַע וּכְאֵלֶם לֹא יִפְתַּח פִּי: (טו) וְאֵהִי כְאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר לֹא שִׁמַּע
וְאִין בְּפִי תוֹכַחֹת: (טז) כִּי לֵךְ ה' הוֹחֲלֵתִי אַתָּה תַעֲנֶנָּה אֲדַנִּי אֱלֹהִי: (יז) כִּי אֶמְרֵתִי
פֶן יִשְׁמְחוּ לִי בְמוֹט רַגְלִי עָלַי הַגְדִּילוּ: (יח) כִּי אֲנִי לְצַלַּע נָכוֹן וּמְכֹאוֹבֵי נִגְדֵי תַמִּיד:
(יט) כִּי עֹנֵי אֲגִיד אֲדַאֵג מִחֲטָאתִי: (כ) וְאִיְבֵי חַיִּים עֲצִמוּ וְרַבּוּ שְׂנְאֵי שְׂקָר: (כא)
וּמִשְׁלָמִי רָעָה תַחַת טוֹבָה יִשְׁטַנּוּנִי תַחַת רַדּוּפֵי רַדְפֵי טוֹב:

(14) I am like a deaf man; I do not hear. [I am] like a mute who does not open his mouth. (15) I became like a man who does not understand and in whose mouth there are no arguments... (16) because I wait for You, Hashem. You will answer, O L-rd, my G-d. (17) For I say, lest they rejoice over me. When my foot wobbled, they lorded over me. (18) For I am susceptible to being struck by a crippling affliction and my pain is always before me. (19) For I admit my iniquity; I worry because of my sin. (20) But my deadly foes flourish, and those who hate me without cause grow great. (21) Those who repay me evil for good rebuke me for my pursuit of good.

PART 5. CONCLUSION. David concludes the mizmor, appealing to Hashem for the yeshuah that He alone can bring.

(כב) אֵל תַּעֲזֹבֵנִי ה' אֱלֹקֵי אֵל תִּרְחַק מִמֶּנִּי: (כג) חוֹשָׁה לַעֲזָרְתִּי אֲדַנִּי תִשׁוּעָתִי:
(22) Don't forsake me, O Hashem, my G-d. Be not far from me. (23) Hurry to my aid, O Hashem, my yeshuah.

Learning the Mizmor

PART 1. MEMORY OF SUFFERING.

(א) מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד
לְהִזְכִּיר:

This **mizmor** was composed by **David** — **מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד** to call to mind — **לְהִזְכִּיר** a time when he suffered from a severe illness. He took to heart the lessons learned from this experience, hoping thereby to minimize the need for such suffering in the future.

(ב) ה' אֵל בְּקֶצֶף תּוֹכִיחֵנִי

Hashem, I realize that I deserve to be rebuked because of my sins, but when You discipline me to make me a better person, I ask that You do it gradually and gently. And so, **Hashem, do not rebuke me** when You are **in Your** state of **anger** — ה' אֵל בְּקֶצֶף תּוֹכִיחֵנִי. You know that I want to serve You and do Your will.

וּבְחַמְתָּךְ תִּיַסְרֵנִי:

And even if my sins call for a harsher discipline, let it be a measured discipline. Do not **chastise me** when you are **in Your** state of **fury** — וּבְחַמְתָּךְ תִּיַסְרֵנִי because then I may not be able to endure the suffering.

(ג) כִּי חֲצִידָךְ נִחַתוּ בִּי

וַתִּנְחַת עָלַי יָדְךָ:

For Your arrows of anguish **have been shot down into me** — כִּי חֲצִידָךְ נִחַתוּ בִּי. I feel the inner pain of knowing that I am deserving of punishment **and** that **Your hand has** found it necessary to **come down upon me** — וַתִּנְחַת עָלַי יָדְךָ with external afflictions of the body.

(ד) אֵין מְתָם בְּבִשְׂרִי מִפְּנֵי זַעֲמָךְ

My afflictions are so extensive that my physical appearance has totally changed. **There is no whole place on my body** — אֵין מְתָם בְּבִשְׂרִי and that is all **because of Your rage** — מִפְּנֵי זַעֲמָךְ.

אֵין שְׁלוֹם בְּעַצְמֵי מִפְּנֵי חַטָּאתֵי:

There is **no** longer even **soundness in my limbs** — אֵין שְׁלוֹם בְּעַצְמֵי and that is all **because of my offense** — מִפְּנֵי חַטָּאתֵי, which is the cause of Your anger. And how can I expect to allay Your anger if my offense has not been resolved.

(ה) כִּי עֹונֹתַי עָבְרוּ רֹאשִׁי

כַּמֶּשֶׁא כָבֵד יִכְבְּדוּ מִמֶּנִּי:

For my sins — כִּי עֹונֹתַי are like flood waters that have accumulated step by step and now **have risen** over **my head** — עָבְרוּ רֹאשִׁי. **Like a heavy load, they are too heavy for me** — כַּמֶּשֶׁא כָבֵד יִכְבְּדוּ מִמֶּנִּי because I don't have enough good deeds to outweigh them.

(ו) הַבְּאִישׁוֹ נִמְקוּ חֲבוּרָתִי
מִפְּנֵי אֲוִלְתִּי:

My sores have festered and dissolved – הַבְּאִישׁוֹ נִמְקוּ חֲבוּרָתִי and that is all because of my moral weakness – מִפְּנֵי אֲוִלְתִּי in yielding to temptation.

(ז) נִעְוִיתִי שְׁחָתִי עַד מְאֹד

Because of my physical weakness and my shame at thinking how foolish I have been I don't even have the strength to stand upright. And so **I am bent and very stooped over** – נִעְוִיתִי שְׁחָתִי עַד מְאֹד.

כָּל הַיּוֹם קִדְר הַלְכָתִּי:

All day long I go about in a black depression – כָּל הַיּוֹם קִדְר הַלְכָתִּי because I cannot take my mind off Your anger. I am afraid that my condition will get worse rather than better.

(ח) כִּי כִסְלִי מְלֵאוֹ נִקְלָה
וְאֵין מְתֵם בְּבִשְׂרִי:

For my insides are filled with burning shame – כִּי כִסְלִי מְלֵאוֹ נִקְלָה and the heat of fever. **And** I cannot even hide my embarrassment from people because **there is no whole place on my body** – וְאֵין מְתֵם בְּבִשְׂרִי.

PART 2. A CRY OF PAIN.

(ט) נִפְּוּגוֹתִי וְנִדְכִּיתִי עַד מְאֹד

I have grown faint and utterly weak – נִפְּוּגוֹתִי וְנִדְכִּיתִי עַד מְאֹד so that I am even unable to ask for help.

שְׁאַגְתִּי מִנְהֵמַת לְבִי:

But even if my strength ebbs and I slip toward death, **I will cry out** – שְׁאַגְתִּי in one last gasp of vitality, one last triumphant roar, a demonstration of my faith that my soul will live on. In this way I will experience **the final convulsion of my heart** – מִנְהֵמַת לְבִי.

(י) ה' נִגְדַדְךָ כָּל תַּאֲוֹתִי
וְאֵנְחָתִי מִמֶּךָ לֹא נִסְתָּרָה:

Because of my weakened condition I am unable to appeal properly to You, Hashem.

But **Hashem, before You** — ה' נגידך there is known **all my aspiration** — כל תאוותי to please You and to serve You in good health. **My bitter sighing** — מאנחתי out of regret for my past foolishness **is not concealed from You** — לא נסתרה לא.

(יא) לבי סחרחר עזבני כחי
ואור עיני גם הם אין אתי:

You see that my mind is spinning — לבי סחרחר and that I cannot focus because of my many troubles. **My strength has failed me** — עזבני כחי. **Even the light of my eyes** — ואור עיני גם הם, which reflects my ability to think clearly, **is gone from me** — אין אתי. Despite everything my concern is to please You and be near to You.

PART 3. FRIENDS AND ENEMIES.

(יב) אהבי ורעי מנגד נגעי יעמדו

Those who I had thought to be **my friends and companions** — אהבי ורעי **stand aloof from my affliction** — מנגד נגעי יעמדו and do not come to my aid because they think my affliction is a just punishment for my sins. They do not even visit me and so I do not benefit from the healing power of their concern.

וקרובי מרחק עמדו:

And those who had pretended to be **my intimates stand at a distance** — וקרובי **מרחק עמדו** for they are afraid that my sickness might be contagious.

(יג) וינקשו מבקשי נפשי
ודרשי רעתי דברו הוות
ומרמות כל היום יהגו:

Since my friends have abandoned me, my enemies have gained new courage to attack me in action, words, and thought. **The seekers of my life** — מבקשי נפשי **lay traps** — וינקשו to prevent me from recovering from illness; **those who seek my harm** — דרשי רעתי **speak treacheries** — דברו הוות. Meanwhile, **they contemplate deceit** — מרמות יהגו **all day long** — כל היום, looking forward to the day when they will be able to celebrate my downfall.

PART 4. NO DEFENSE.

(יד) וְאֲנִי כְחֹרֵשׁ לֹא אֶשְׁמַע
וּכְאֵלֶם לֹא יִפְתַּח פִּי:

But although I hear what they are saying and I see what they are planning, I keep silent. I trust in Hashem to save me. **I am like a deaf man** — וְאֲנִי כְחֹרֵשׁ — and so I pretend that **I do not hear** — לֹא אֶשְׁמַע. I am **like a mute who does not open his mouth** — וּכְאֵלֶם לֹא יִפְתַּח פִּי.

(טו) וְאֶהְיֶה כְּאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר לֹא שָׁמַע
וְאֵין בְּפִיו תּוֹכְחוֹת:

Because I had no intention of answering them, **I became like a man who does not understand** — וְאֶהְיֶה כְּאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר לֹא שָׁמַע — his accusers **and in whose mouth there are no arguments** — וְאֵין בְּפִיו תּוֹכְחוֹת — with which to defend himself.

(טז) כִּי לְךָ ה' הוֹחֲלֵתִי
אַתָּה תַעֲנֶנּוּ ה' אֶלְקֵי:

This is **because I wait for You** alone, Hashem — כִּי לְךָ ה' הוֹחֲלֵתִי — to have pity on me; I am confident that **You will answer, O L-rd, my G-d** — אַתָּה תַעֲנֶנּוּ אֱלֹהֵי — and defend me against my accusers.

(יז) כִּי אֶמְרֵתִי כִּן יִשְׂמְחוּ לִי
בְמוֹט רַגְלִי עָלַי הִגְדִּילוּ:

For I say — כִּי אֶמְרֵתִי — to myself, "I will remain silent **lest they rejoice over me** — כִּן יִשְׂמְחוּ לִי. They will be glad to see me betray my weakness and my pain when I attempt to answer. After all, in the past when they saw **my foot wobble** — בְּמוֹט רַגְלִי — just a little, **they lorded over me** — עָלַי הִגְדִּילוּ — with arrogance. Surely, they will take advantage of any weakness!"

(יח) כִּי אֲנִי לְצַלַּע נָכוֹן
וּמִכְאוּבֵי נִגְדֵי תָמִיד:

I am concerned about their reaction **for** — כִּי — I know that **I am susceptible to being struck by a crippling affliction** — אֲנִי לְצַלַּע נָכוֹן. **And** because **my pain is always before me** — וּמִכְאוּבֵי נִגְדֵי תָמִיד, I am continually under the threat that it

will return in full force.

(יט) כִּי עֲוֹנֵי אֲגִיד
אֲדַאֵג מִחַטָּאתַי:

I don't try to defend myself before my accusers **because** — כִּי in my heart I know that I have sinned. **I admit my iniquity** — עֲוֹנֵי אֲגִיד and I constantly remind myself of it. **I worry because of my sin** — אֲדַאֵג מִחַטָּאתַי and this is what encourages me to do *teshuvah*.

(כ) וְאִיְבֵי חַיִּים עֲצֻמוּ
וְרִבּוֹ שִׁנְאֵי שָׁקֶר:

But my deadly foes flourish — וְאִיְבֵי חַיִּים עֲצֻמוּ, and those who hate me without cause grow great — וְרִבּוֹ שִׁנְאֵי שָׁקֶר.

(כא) וּמִשְׁלָמֵי רָעָה תַחַת טוֹבָה
יִשְׁטַנּוּנִי תַחַת רְדֹפֵי טוֹב:

Those who repay me evil for good — וּמִשְׁלָמֵי רָעָה תַחַת טוֹבָה **rebuke me for my pursuit of good** — יִשְׁטַנּוּנִי תַחַת רְדֹפֵי טוֹב and because of my holding fast to Hashem and His *mitzvos*.

PART 5. CONCLUSION.

(כב) אֵל תַּעֲזֹבֵנִי ה' אֱלֹקֵי
אֵל תִּרְחַק מִמֶּנִּי:

My enemies think there is no one to help me, but I count on You. **Don't forsake me, O Hashem, my G-d** — אֵל תַּעֲזֹבֵנִי ה' אֱלֹקֵי. **Be not far from me** — אֵל תִּרְחַק מִמֶּנִּי.

(כג) חוֹשָׁה לְעֶזְרָתִי
ה' תִּשׁוּעָתִי:

Hurry to my aid — חוֹשָׁה לְעֶזְרָתִי, before they succeed in their vicious objective of destroying me. **Hashem**, You are **my yeshuah** — אֲדֹנָי תִּשׁוּעָתִי, the One I am counting on, for You have saved me so many times in the past.

Living the Mizmor

Listed below are some of the lessons that you can draw from this mizmor, as well as some of the thoughts you might have in mind when you say the words of the mizmor as a *tefillah*, expressing your devotion to Hashem.

Lessons for Life - Your Attitude.

[38:1] MEMORIES. – מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד לְהִזְכִּיר – “By David, to call to mind [a severe illness].” Recall the sufferings of the past from time to time and take to heart the lessons you learned from the experience.

Tefillos for Life - Your Teshuvah.

[38:2] INTROSPECTION. – ה' אֵל בְּקֶצֶף תּוֹכִיחֵנִי וּבַחֲמָתְךָ תִּיַסְרֵנִי – “Hashem, do not rebuke me in Your anger nor chastise me in Your fury.” If you are suffering severe illness or pain, search your heart and ask yourself what sin you might have committed to warrant the anger of Hashem.

[38:4] – אֵין מָתֵם בְּבִשְׂרִי מִפְּנֵי זַעֲמֶךָ אֵין שְׁלוֹם בְּעַצְמֵי מִפְּנֵי חַטָּאתִי –
 “There is no whole place on my body because of Your rage, no soundness of limbs because of my offense.”

[38:5] CONFESSION – כִּי עֲוֹנוֹתַי עָבְרוּ רֵאשִׁי כְּמִשָּׂא כָבֵד יִכָּבְדוּ מִמֶּנִּי – “For my sins have risen over my head. Like a heavy load, they are too heavy for me.” When you confess your sins, let each sin remind you of all the others. Don't be easy on yourself but acknowledge all your failings. Then Hashem will forgive you.

[38:19] REGRET – כִּי עֲוֹנִי אֶגִּיד אֲדַאֵג מִחַטָּאתִי – “For I admit my iniquity; I worry because of my sin.” When you admit your sin, the fact that you offended your Creator and that you have distanced yourself from Him should weigh heavily upon you. You should ask yourself how you could have been so foolish.

Tefillos for Life - Your Anguish.

[38:7] DEPRESSION. – נַעֲוִיתִי שַׁחְתִּי עַד מְאֹד כָּל הַיּוֹם קִדְר הִלְכָתִי – “I am bent and very stooped over. All day long I go about in a black depression.” If your troubles have brought you down and your mood is depressed, acknowledge your feelings to Hashem and He will surely comfort you.

Tefillos for Life - Your Relationship to Hashem.

[38:10] ASPIRATION. – אֲדֹנָי נִגְדָדְךָ כָּל תַּאֲוֹתַי וְאַנְחָתִי מִמֶּךָ לֹא נִסְתָּרָה – *“My Lord, before You is all my aspiration. My sighing is not concealed from You.”* Recall your hopes of being close to Hashem, the relationship which you have sadly lost. Recall your yearning to be able see Him once again as the complete Master of your life and recall the happiness which you once found, but hope to regain again.

[38:22] – אֵל תַּעֲזֹבֵנִי ה' אֱלֹקֵי אֵל תִּרְחַק מִמֶּנִּי – *“Don't forsake me, O Hashem, my G-d. Be not far from me.”*

Sources

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

| | |
|--|---|
| א - רש"י, רד"ק, בן-רמון, רשר"ה | ג - בן-רמון, אבן יחיאל, מלבי"ם, רשר"ה, נר לרגלי |
| ב - אבן עזרא, בן-רמון, נר לרגלי | יד - רד"ק, בן-רמון, אבן יחיאל |
| ג - רש"י, אבן עזרא, מלבי"ם, רשר"ה | טו - רד"ק, בן-רמון |
| ד - אבן עזרא, רד"ק, אלשיך | טז - אבן עזרא, רד"ק, ספורנו, מלבי"ם |
| ה - אבן עזרא, רד"ק, המאירי | יז - בן-רמון, אבן יחיאל, מצודות, |
| ו - אבן עזרא, בן-רמון, רשר"ה | יח - רש"י, המאירי, אבן יחיאל |
| ז - אבן עזרא, רד"ק, בן-רמון, רשר"ה, נר לרגלי | יט - רש"י, בן-רמון, נר לרגלי |
| ח - רד"ק, המאירי, ספורנו, מלבי"ם | כ - רש"י, רד"ק, מלבי"ם |
| ט - רש"י, רד"ק, מלבי"ם, נר לרגלי | כא - רש"י, רד"ק |
| י - רד"ק, המאירי, בן-רמון, ספורנו | כב - רד"ק |
| יא - אבן עזרא, רד"ק, אבן יחיאל, אלשיך | כג - בן-רמון, ספורנו, מצודות |
| יב - רש"י, רד"ק, ספורנו | |

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