

## Mizmor 039

# A Crisis of Conscience

### Key Concepts

In Mizmor 039 of Tehillim David takes us through a crisis of conscience as he deals with the frustrations of having to endure a painful illness that seems to be endless. The mizmor is somewhat disturbing for we see David reaching the limits of his endurance. His illness has brought him to the point where he appears to be challenging Hashem and Hashem's plan for the world. However, it does not take long for David to regain his perspective and his humility when he realizes how insignificant he is in comparison to the infinity of the Creator.

David begins the mizmor by firmly stating that he is fully prepared to accept his illness without complaint. But then David finds himself challenging Hashem to offer some kind of assurance that his pain will come to an end and that he can look forward to a pain-free life when it is over. But in the course of David's cry of unhappiness he begins to realize that life in this world is merely a passing shadow and is of little consequence in comparison to the eternity of Hashem. With his new insight David gains the peace of mind to approach Hashem asking to be healed of his affliction so that he is enabled to fulfill his mission in this temporary world.

**Navigating Tehillim.** This mizmor is related to Mizmorim 006 and 038 in which David also asked to be healed from a life-threatening affliction. However, in the current mizmor, the frustrations of an extended illness have tested his resolve and he finds himself going through a moment of crisis before discovering how to put his situation in perspective.

### Exploring the Mizmor

**PART 1. MOMENT OF CRISIS.** Initially, David assures Hashem of his resolve to accept his affliction calmly and in silence. David knows that he has been afflicted because of his sins and he is confident that Hashem will heal him at the appropriate time. But suddenly David is overwhelmed by pain and frustration and he feels compelled to speak out.

(א) לְמִנְצַחַ לִידוֹתָיו מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד: (ב) אָמַרְתִּי אֲשֶׁמְרָה דְרָכֵי מַחְטֹא בְלִשְׁוֹנֵי  
אֲשֶׁמְרָה לְפִי מַחְסוֹם בְּעַד רָשָׁע לְנִגְדִי: (ג) נֶאֱלַמְתִּי דוֹמְיָה הַחֲשִׁיתִי מְטוֹב וְכִאֲבִי

נְעֹכֵר: (ד) חֵם לְבִי בְקִרְבִי בְהִגִּי תִבְעַר אִשׁ דְּבַרְתִּי בְלִשׁוֹנִי:

(1) For the musician, Yedusun. A mizmor by David. (2) I resolved to watch my attitude and avoid sinning with my tongue. I would keep my mouth muzzled while any evildoer is before me. (3) I became mute, totally silent. I kept quiet [even] from good though my pain was intense. (4) [But then] my heart grew hot within me. A fire blazed up in my thoughts [and] I spoke out with my tongue.

**PART 2. TURNAROUND.** David challenges Hashem to offer some kind of assurance that his pain will come to an end and that he can look forward to a pain-free life when it is over. But in the course of David's cry of unhappiness he begins to realize that his priorities are mixed up. He has been focusing on improving his life in this world, but that is an insignificant and futile goal. Life in this world is merely a passing shadow and is of little consequence in comparison to the eternity of Hashem. The most that one can expect to achieve in this world is the opportunity to grow in spirit and to serve His Creator.

(ה) הוֹדִיעֵנִי ה' קְצֵי וּמִדַּת יָמֵי מָה הִיא אֲדַעָה מָה חֹדֵל אָנִי: (ו) הֲיֵה טְפָחוֹת נִתְתָּה יָמֵי וְחֻלְדֵי כְּאִין נִגְדָּד אֶדְּ כָּל הֶבֶל כָּל אָדָם נֹצֵב סֵלָה: (ז) אֶדְּ בְּצִלְמֵ יִתְהַלֵּךְ אִישׁ אֶדְּ הֶבֶל יִהְיֶינּוּ יִצְבֹּר וְלֹא יָדַע מִי אֲסָפָם:

(5) [Hashem,] Tell me my purpose. What is the measure of my days? I want to know what I [should do in] this life. (6) Behold, You have set my days in handbreadths. My life span is insignificant before You. [It is nothing] but total futility. [Yet] every man stands [before You]. Selah. (7) But man goes about in the dark shadow. [His] hectic activity is but futility. He accumulates, but he does not know who will gather them in.

**PART 3. RENEWAL.** With his new insight David resolves once more to accept his illness as a just punishment for his sins. This awareness gives him the peace of mind to approach Hashem in humble tefillah, asking to be forgiven his sins, and as a result to be healed of his affliction so that he is enabled to serve Hashem and fulfill his mission in this temporary world.

(ח) וְעַתָּה מָה קְוִיתִי אֲדַנִּי תוֹחֲלֵתִי לָךְ הִיא: (ט) מִכָּל פְּשָׁעֵי הַצִּילֵנִי חֲרַפְתָּ נָבֵל אֵל תִּשְׁיִמְנֵנִי: (י) נֶאֱלַמְתִּי לֹא אֶפְתַּח פִּי כִּי אַתָּה עָשִׂיתָ: (יא) הֲסֵר מֵעָלַי נִגְעָד מִתַּגְרַת יָדָד אָנִי כָלִיתִי: (יב) בְּתוֹכָחוֹת עַל עֶוֹן יִסְרַתְּ אִישׁ וְתִמָּס כְּעֵשׂ חַמוּדוֹ אֶדְּ הֶבֶל כָּל אָדָם סֵלָה: (יג) שְׁמַעָה תִפְלֵתִי ה' וְשׁוּעָתִי הַאֲזִינָה אֵל דְּמַעְתִּי אֵל תִּחַרְשׁ כִּי גֵר

אֲנֹכִי עִמָּךְ וְתוֹשֵׁב כָּכָל אַבֹּתַי: (יד) הַשֵּׁעַ מִמְּנִי וְאַבְלִיגָה בְּטָרָם אֵלֶיךָ וְאִינְנִי:  
 (8) *And now, for what do I hope, O Master? My yearning is to You. (9) Rescue me from all my transgressions. Don't let me be an object of shame before the wicked. (10) I have resolved to be mute because it is You Who has done it. (11) Take Your affliction from me; I am completely devastated by the assault of Your hand. (12) In rebuke for sin You afflict a man. You eat away like a moth at his precious [flesh]. All mankind is but futility, Selah. (13) Hear my prayer, Hashem, and give ear to my outcry; don't be silent to my tears. For I am a sojourner before You, a temporary resident like all my forefathers. (14) Release me and let me recover before I depart and I am no more.*

## Learning the Mizmor

### PART 1. MOMENT OF CRISIS.

(א) לְמִנְצַחַ לִידוּתוֹן  
 מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד:

This song has been prepared **for the musician** — לְמִנְצַחַ — named **Yedusun** — לִידוּתוֹן, who will perform it. It is a **mizmor** composed **by David** — מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד.

(ב) אֶמְרָתִי אֶשְׁמְרָה דְרָכֵי  
 מִחֲטוֹא בְּלִשׁוֹנִי

When I first became seriously ill, I realized that my *emunah* was being tested. And so **I resolved** — אֶמְרָתִי **to guard my attitude** — אֶשְׁמְרָה דְרָכֵי of self-pity and **avoid sinning with my tongue** — מִחֲטוֹא בְּלִשׁוֹנִי, not only in my words but in my manner of expression towards Hashem. I knew that everything that happened to me was ultimately for my benefit and so I wanted to accept my afflictions in a positive frame of mind.

אֶשְׁמְרָה לְפִי מִחֲסוֹם  
 בְּעַד רָשָׁע לְנֶגְדִי:

I resolved that **I would** accept Hashem's judgment bravely and **keep my mouth muzzled** — אֶשְׁמְרָה לְפִי מִחֲסוֹם. I would not question or criticize the judgment that had been imposed on me. In fact, I would exercise special self-control **while** any **evildoer**, who is hoping to see me betray Hashem, **is** standing **before me** — בְּעַד

רָשַׁע לִנְגְדִי and observing my reaction. I knew that if I showed weakness, my enemies would be only too happy to mock me and see in my words a betrayal of my Creator.

(ג) נֶאֱלַמְתִּי דוּמְיָה  
הֶחְשִׁיתִי מִטוֹב וּכְאַבִּי נֶעְכָּר:

**I became like a mute** — נֶאֱלַמְתִּי who has completely lost the power of speech, **totally silent** — דוּמְיָה. **I even kept quiet** — הֶחְשִׁיתִי **from** expressing a **good** thought — מִטוֹב, such as the righteousness of Hashem's judgment. I didn't trust myself to hold back cries of resentment once I started speaking. I managed to keep quiet even though **my pain was intense** — וּכְאַבִּי נֶעְכָּר.

(ד) חֵם לִבִּי בְקִרְבִּי  
בְהִגִּי תִבְעַר אֵשׁ  
דִּבַּרְתִּי בְלִשׁוֹנִי:

But my anxiety was so great that the thoughts in **my heart grew hot within me** — חֵם לִבִּי בְקִרְבִּי and I was unable to maintain my resolve. **A fire** of frustration **blazed up in my thoughts** — בְהִגִּי תִבְעַר אֵשׁ and without really intending to **I spoke out with my tongue** — דִּבַּרְתִּי בְלִשׁוֹנִי. My words were as follows:

## PART 2. TURNAROUND.

(ה) הוֹדִיעֵנִי ה' קִצִּי

I am in so much pain! Is there a reason for me to continue living? Hashem, **tell me my purpose** — הוֹדִיעֵנִי ה' קִצִּי in this life, so that I can deal with my distress. Will I ever again have the opportunity to live a meaningful life free of pain? Will I have enough time to fulfill my mission in life?

וּמַדַּת יָמֵי מָה הִיא  
אֲדַע מָה חֵדַל אָנִי:

Tell me **what is the measure of my days** — וּמַדַּת יָמֵי מָה הִיא, so that I will better know how to value the days I have left and so that **I will know what I** should do in **this life** — אֲדַע מָה חֵדַל אָנִי.

(ו) הִנֵּה טַפְחוֹת נְתַתָּה יָמַי  
וְחֻלְדֵי כְּאֵין נִגְדָדָה  
אֵךְ כָּל הַבֵּל כָּל אָדָם נֹצֵב סֵלָה:

**Behold, You have set my days** to be measured only in **handbreadths** — הִנֵּה טַפְחוֹת נְתַתָּה יָמַי, for they are short. **My life span is insignificant before You** — וְחֻלְדֵי כְּאֵין נִגְדָדָה. In fact, this world is nothing **but total futility** — אֵךְ כָּל הַבֵּל. And yet You have created **every man to stand** — כָּל אָדָם נֹצֵב before You and serve You. Should man not live **forever?** — סֵלָה.

(ז) אֵךְ בְּצִלֵּם יִתְהַלֵּךְ אִישׁ

**But** despite his noble stature, **man goes about** his daily life **in the dark shadow** — אֵךְ בְּצִלֵּם יִתְהַלֵּךְ אִישׁ of ignorance and insecurity for no one knows what tragedies will befall him.

אֵךְ הֶבֶל יַהֲמִיּוֹן  
יִצְבֹּר וְלֹא יָדַע מִי אֶסְפֶּם:

All of mankind's **hectic activity** is **but futility** — אֵךְ הֶבֶל יַהֲמִיּוֹן. **He accumulates** — יִצְבֹּר possessions, **but he does not know who will gather them in** — וְלֹא יָדַע מִי אֶסְפֶּם. He does not know who will benefit from his efforts after he is gone.

### PART 3. RENEWAL.

(ח) וְעַתָּה מֶה קְוִיתִי אֲדֹנָי  
תּוֹחַלְתִּי לָךְ הִיא:

**And now** — וְעַתָּה I realize that any expectations that I might have had of gratification in this world were misplaced. The ultimate meaning of life is not physical, but spiritual. So **for what do I hope, my Master** — מֶה קְוִיתִי אֲדֹנָי? **My yearning is to You** — תּוֹחַלְתִּי לָךְ הִיא, to let me serve You. To that end I humbly ask that You forgive my sins, heal my body, and guide me to a better understanding of Your ways. Then I will find my true happiness, not in This World, but in the World to Come.

(ט) מִכָּל פְּשָׁעֵי הַצִּילֵנִי

I realize that my sins are the cause of my afflictions. So I now humbly ask Your forgiveness. **Rescue me from all my transgressions** — מִכָּל פְּשָׁעֵי הַצִּילֵנִי, which

have dragged me down to my present state.

חֲרַפַּת נָבֵל אֶל תְּשִׁימֵנִי:

Surely, the extent of my afflictions has been sufficient to warrant atonement for my sins. I sincerely hope that it is not necessary for me to suffer disgrace as well.

**Don't let me be an object of shame before the wicked** — חֲרַפַּת נָבֵל אֶל תְּשִׁימֵנִי, who gloat over my misfortune and ridicule my piety!

(י) נִאֲלַמְתִּי לֹא אֶפְתַּח פִּי

And so I have again resolved **to be mute** — נִאֲלַמְתִּי and not complain about my situation. **I won't open my mouth** — לֹא אֶפְתַּח פִּי even to defend myself against evildoers who are making fun of me. I know that if they are doing this, it is Your will.

כִּי אַתָּה עָשִׂיתָ:

I won't complain **because** I know that **it is** really **You Who has done it** — כִּי אַתָּה עָשִׂיתָ. They are merely an instrument of Your discipline.

(יא) הִסֵּר מֵעָלַי נִגְעָךְ

מִתְגֵּרַת יָדְךָ אֲנִי כְלִיתִי:

Nevertheless, the affliction which You have imposed upon me prevents my spiritual fulfillment. Therefore, I ask that You **take Your affliction from me** — הִסֵּר מֵעָלַי נִגְעָךְ. I have surely paid for my sins as **I am completely devastated by the assault of Your hand** — מִתְגֵּרַת יָדְךָ אֲנִי כְלִיתִי.

(יב) בְּתוֹכָחוֹת עַל עֹון יִסְרָתָ אִישׁ

וּתְמָס כְּעֵשׂ חֲמוּדוֹ

It is Your way Hashem that **in rebuke for sin** — בְּתוֹכָחוֹת עַל עֹון **You afflict a man** — יִסְרָתָ אִישׁ. **You** introduce an affliction to **eat away like a moth at his precious** flesh — וּתְמָס כְּעֵשׂ חֲמוּדוֹ.

אֵךְ הֶבֶל כֹּל אָדָם סָלָה:

Clearly, if a man has no control over what is most precious to him, **all mankind is but futility**, — אֵךְ הֶבֶל כֹּל אָדָם. The flesh is temporary, but the spirit is eternal, **Selah** — סָלָה.

(יג) שְׁמָעָה תְּפִלָּתִי ה'  
 וְשׁוֹעֲתִי הָאֲזִינָה  
 אֶל דְּמָעָתִי אֶל תְּחִרְשׁ

**Hear my prayer, Hashem** — שְׁמָעָה תְּפִלָּתִי ה'; it is a sincere act of devotion to You. **And give ear to my outcry** — וְשׁוֹעֲתִי הָאֲזִינָה, for it expresses the pain of my affliction and my desperate need for a yeshuah. Now that I have accepted Your rebuke and endured my punishment, cleanse me of my sin and heal me. And if You are not moved by my prayer or my outcry, have pity on me and **don't be silent to my heartfelt tears** — אֶל דְּמָעָתִי אֶל תְּחִרְשׁ.

כִּי גַר אָנֹכִי עֹמֵד  
 תּוֹשֵׁב כְּכֹל אֲבוֹתַי:

**For** I now truly understand that **I am** only a **sojourner before You** in this world — כִּי גַר אָנֹכִי עֹמֵד. At most I am a **temporary resident like all my forefathers** — תּוֹשֵׁב כְּכֹל אֲבוֹתַי. Generations come and go, but there is no real difference in our status as travelers passing through the world that You have created for us.

(יד) הֲשַׁע מִמֶּנִּי וְאַבְלִיגָה  
 בְּטָרָם אֵלֶיךָ וְאֵינְנִי:

**Release** Your hand of punishment **from me** — הֲשַׁע מִמֶּנִּי **and let me recover** — וְאַבְלִיגָה from my illness so that I can again serve You **before I depart** this world **and I am no more** — בְּטָרָם אֵלֶיךָ וְאֵינְנִי. I will be able to make up for my past failures only as long as You allow me to remain in this temporary existence.

## 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.

[39:2] RESTRAINT. — אָמַרְתִּי אֲשַׁמְרָה דְרָכֵי מַחֲטָא בְלִשׁוֹנִי — "I resolved to watch my attitude and avoid sinning with my tongue. I would keep my mouth muzzled." Follow David's example and restrain your natural tendency to feel resentful about the difficulties you encounter in life. Hashem has sent those difficulties to you for a purpose.

[39:3] – נִאֲלַמְתִּי דוּמְיָהּ הַחֲשִׁיתִי מְטוֹב וְכֹאֲבִי נֶעְכָּר – “I became mute, totally silent. I kept quiet [even] from good though my pain was intense.”

[39:14] – הֲשַׁע מִמֶּנִּי וְאַבְלִיגָה בְּטָרַם אֵלַי וְאִינְנִי – “Release me and let me recover before I depart and I am no more.”

[39:6] PERSPECTIVE. – הִנֵּה סְפָחוֹת נִתְּתָה יָמֵי, וְחֻלְדֵי כְּאֵין נִגְדָד – “Behold, You have set my days in handbreadths. My life span is insignificant before You.” If your difficulties are making you feel desperate and frustrated, curb your resentment by putting your situation in perspective. Realize how insignificant you are in the vastness of Creation. Don't feel that you have a right to a pleasant situation in life because of who you are.

[39:13] – כִּי גֵר אֲנִי עִמָּךְ תּוֹשָׁב כְּכֹל אֲבוֹתַי – “For I am a sojourner before You, a temporary resident like all my forefathers.”

### **Lessons for Life - Your Behavior.**

[39:7] WEALTH – אִישׁ אֵדָה הֶבֶל יִהְיֶינָה יִצְבֹּר וְלֹא יָדַע מִי אֶסְפָּם – “[Man's] hectic activity is but futility. He accumulates, but he does not know who will gather them in.” Don't focus your energy and resources on gathering wealth. It won't last and your efforts will have been wasted. Any wealth you assemble is insignificant in the overall scheme of things.

### **Tefillos for Life - Your Relationship with Hashem.**

[39:8] RENEWAL – עֲתָה מֶה קִוִּיתִי אֲדַנִּי תוֹחֲלֵתִי לָךְ הִיא – “And now, for what do I hope, O Master? My yearning is to You.” Realize that expectations of gratification in this world are misplaced. The ultimate meaning of life is not physical, but spiritual, and so you should yearn for fulfillment through bonding with your Creator.

[39:13] APPEAL TO BE HEARD. – שְׁמַעָה תִּפְלְתִי ה' וְשׁוֹעֲתִי הֲאִזְנָה אֶל דְּמַעֲתִי – אֵל תִּחַרְשׁ – “Hear my prayer, Hashem, and give ear to my outcry; don't be silent to my tears.” Ask Hashem to listen to your tefillah respond to your heartfelt emotions.

### **Tefillos for Life - Your Teshuvah.**

[39:9] FORGIVENESS. – מִכָּל פְּשָׁעֵי הַצִּילֵנִי – “Rescue me from all my



*transgressions.*" Ask Hashem to forgive your transgressions and rescue you from being caught up in their consequences.

**Tefillos for Life - Your Anguish.**

[39:11] HEALING. – **הַסֵּר מֵעָלַי נִגְעֶךָ מִתְגַּרְתַּת יָדְךָ אֲנִי כְּלִיתִי** – *"Take Your affliction from me; I am completely devastated by the assault of Your hand."* Ask Hashem to heal your affliction for it has already accomplished its purpose.

**Sources**

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

- |   |                                      |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| ח - רש"י, בן־רמוך, ספורנו, מלבי"ם, נר לרגלי | א - רש"י, רד"ק                       |
| ט - רד"ק, מלבי"ם, מאיר טוב                  | ב - רד"ק, מצודות, נר לרגלי, מאיר טוב |
| י - רד"ק, בן־רמוך, מלבי"ם, מאיר טוב         | ג - אבן עזרא, רד"ק, נר לרגלי         |
| יא - המאירי, בן־רמוך, מלבי"ם                | ד - אבן עזרא, המאירי, אלשיך, מלבי"ם, |
| יב - רש"י, אבן עזרא, רד"ק, אבן יחיאל        | ה - נר לרגלי, מאיר טוב               |
| יג - רד"ק, ספורנו, מלבי"ם, נר לרגלי         | ו - רד"ק, המאירי, רש"י               |
| יד - רש"י, רד"ק, המאירי                     | ז - רש"י, רד"ק, ספורנו, מאיר טוב     |

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