

## Mizmor 120

# VICTIMIZED BY LIES

### Key Concepts

This is the first of 15 mizmorim to be sung by the Leviim in the *Beis HaMikdash*, standing on the 15 steps leading up from the women's courtyard to the men's courtyard. Although the *Beis HaMikdash* had not yet been built when the mizmorim were composed, David was granted the *zechus* (privilege) of visualizing its plan of construction through the power of *nevuah* (prophecy).

The 15 *mizmorim* serve to inspire the people to strive upward and rise to the spiritual heights of *avodas Hashem*. Thus, the 15 songs were sung with ever increasing intensity.

In this first of the 15 *mizmorim*, David speaks of a perilous time when the Jewish nation is under threat of attack by the surrounding nations. The attack has not yet begun but our enemies are preparing the ground with a stream of lies and deceptions that are being perpetrated against us.

### Exploring the Mizmor

**PART 1. RESCUE ME FROM DECEIT.** David speaks for the Jewish nation as it appeals to Hashem to rescue it from its deceitful enemies. The nation recalls that it was in similar situations in the past and Hashem always answered. It then appeals directly to Hashem to be saved.

(א) שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת אֶל ה' בְּצָרָתָהּ לִי קָרָאתִי וַיַּעֲנֵנִי: (ב) ה' הֲצִילָה נַפְשִׁי מִשִּׁפְּת שֶׁקֶר  
מִלְּשׁוֹן רַמְיָהּ:

(1) *A song of the steps. [I turned] to Hashem when I was in dire distress [Whenever] I called upon him, He answered me. (2) "Hashem, rescue my soul from false lips, a deceitful tongue."*

**PART 2. THE PAIN OF SLANDER.** The nation turns to its enemies and accuses them of slander. Their deceitful words are painful, like sharp arrows and burning coals. And yet they will not benefit the perpetrators.

(ג) מַה יִּתֶּן לְךָ וַיְמַה יִּסִּיף לְךָ לְשׁוֹן רַמְיָהּ: (ד) חֲצִי גִבּוֹר שְׁנוּנִים עִם גְּחֹלֵי רַתְּמִים:  
(3) *"You slanderer, what does a deceitful tongue give to you and what value*

*does it add [to your life]? (4) [Your words are like the] sharp arrows of the warrior with coals of juniper [wood].”*

**PART 3. WHEN WILL IT END?** The nation laments upon its tragic situation. The Exile has no letup and the oppressors are not interested in a peaceful resolution to the conflict which they have initiated.

(ה) אוֹיֵה לִי כִי גִרְתִּי מִשָּׁדָּד שְׁכַנְתִּי עִם אֲהֶלֵי קֶדָר: (ו) רַבַּת שְׁכֻנָּה לָּהּ נִפְשִׁי עִם שׁוֹנְאֵי שְׁלוֹם: (ז) אֲנִי שָׁלוֹם וְכִי אֲדַבֵּר הַמָּה לַמְלַחְמָה:

*(5) Woe unto me for I have dwelled in a drawn-out [exile]. I dwelled with [people who inhabit] the tents of Kedar. (6) Too long has my soul dwelled with those who hate peace. (7) I [seek] peace but when I speak [to them], they are for war.*

## Additional Thoughts

Should we describe the 15 steps in the *Bais Hamikdash* as leading up from the women's courtyard or leading down from the men's courtyard? Many *meforshim* (commentaries) refer to them as leading up and that is consistent with the *Shir Hamaalos* theme of striving upwards. However, *Rashi* on *Tehillim* describes the steps as leading down, and that follows the language of the Gemara (*Sukkah* 51b).

To reconcile the conflict we might consider both as being valid. It all depends on your point of reference. Every person is on a ladder of personal development in *middos* (character traits) like modesty, concern for others, promptness, integrity, etc. No matter at what rung he happens to be, he should strive to rise higher while being careful to avoid slipping lower. Both concerns are valid since a person cannot expect to remain at the same level. He will always be rising or falling, and indeed he will generally be rising in some areas while simultaneously falling in others.

The word "*maalos*" may also be translated as "virtues" or "strengths". A person may be rising in his interpersonal relationships while falling in his relationship with Hashem, or vice-versa. The main point is for an individual to periodically ask himself whether he is rising or falling in all the virtues of importance to him and to the Torah, and then try to bring his behavior more into line with his ideals.

## Learning the Mizmor

### PART 1. SAVE ME FROM DECEIT.

(א) שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת

**A song of the steps.**

אֵל ה' בַּצָּרְתָּהּ לִי  
קָרָאתִי וַיַּעֲנֵנִי:

[The nation recalls:] I have been at fault because in the past I turned **to Hashem** — אֵל ה' — to save me only **when I was in dire distress** — בַּצָּרְתָּהּ לִי. Even so, whenever **I called upon him, He answered me** — קָרָאתִי וַיַּעֲנֵנִי. Despite my unworthiness He made me feel that He heard my call for help. Although I am not yet in a state of crisis, I see storm clouds on the horizon and I must begin to look for His *yeshuah* now.

(ב) ה' הֲצִילָהּ נַפְשִׁי מִשִּׁפְּת שֶׁקֶר  
מִלְשׁוֹן רַמְיָהּ:

**Hashem, rescue my soul** — ה' הֲצִילָהּ נַפְשִׁי — **from** the nations among whom I now live. I must not wait until their evil comes to pass. For they are building a climate of hate by manufacturing lies with their **false lips** — מִשִּׁפְּת שֶׁקֶר. In my presence they speak with **a deceitful tongue** — מִלְשׁוֹן רַמְיָהּ, pretending to be friendly while actually working against me. As long as I continue to live among them I am also in danger of being influenced by their culture of hypocrisy.

### PART 2. THE PAIN OF SLANDER.

(ג) מַה יִּתֵּן לָךְ וַיְמַה יִסִּיף לָךְ  
לְשׁוֹן רַמְיָהּ:

[The nation addresses the slanderer:] **What** benefit **does** your web of lies **give to you** — מַה יִּתֵּן לָךְ — **and what value does a deceitful tongue** add to your life — וַיְמַה יִסִּיף לָךְ לְשׁוֹן רַמְיָהּ? Do you not realize that the truth will come out and Hashem, Who hates falsehood, will save me from you.

(ד) חֲצִי גִבּוֹר שְׁנוּנִים

You think you will succeed with false words like the **sharp arrows of the warrior**

— חֲצִי גִבּוֹר שְׁנוּנִים, which kill from a distance and which seem painless at first because of their sharpness.

### עַם גַּחְלֵי רֶתְמִים:

You seek to deceive **with** words of deception that are like **coals of juniper** wood — **עַם גַּחְלֵי רֶתְמִים**.

*Juniper is a type of evergreen tree. The core of its coals continues to burn, even after the outside has cooled off. Thus, a person does not realize the danger. And the effect of vicious remarks continues to linger in the mind of the listener even after the lies have been exposed.*

### PART 3. WHEN WILL IT END?

(ה) אוֹיָה לִי כִי גִרְתִּי מִשָּׁדָּךְ

שְׁכַנְתִּי עִם אֶהְלֵי קֶדָר:

**Woe unto me**, says Yisrael — אוֹיָה לִי **for I have dwelled in a drawn-out** exile — כִּי גִרְתִּי מִשָּׁדָּךְ, especially with the successor regimes that inherited the power of Rome. **I** also **dwelled** in subjugation **with** the peoples descended from the nomadic Yishmaelim who inhabit **the tents of Kedar** — שְׁכַנְתִּי עִם אֶהְלֵי קֶדָר.

*Note that מִשָּׁדָּךְ, which means "drawn-out" is also used as another name for Rome. Kedar was one of the four sons of Yishmael (Bereishis 25:13). The nation of Kedar is mentioned a number of times in Yeshayah (e.g. 21:16). See also the "black" tents of Kedar in Shir HaShirim 1:5.*

(ו) רַבַּת שְׁכַנָּה לָהּ נַפְשִׁי

עִם שׁוֹנֵא שְׁלוֹם:

**Too long has my soul dwelled** — רַבַּת שְׁכַנָּה לָהּ נַפְשִׁי **with those who hate peace** — עִם שׁוֹנֵא שְׁלוֹם. Since they hate the truth they also hate peace. In conditions of peace the truth will be discovered so they prefer to perpetuate the state of war and turmoil.

(ז) אֲנִי שְׁלוֹם

וְכִי אֶדְבַר הַמֶּה לַמְּלַחְמָה:

I am not like the nations around me who hate the truth and speak falsehoods. **I** seek **peace** — אֲנִי שְׁלוֹם and consistency between spoken words and reality; **but when I** try to **speak** to them — וְכִי אֶדְבַר, **they are for war** — הַמֶּה לַמְּלַחְמָה.

Even when they see that I want peace they resist it and whatever I do to placate them is used as a pretext to make war upon me.

## 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.

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

[120:1] IN DISTRESS. – **בְּצָרָתִי לִי קָרָאתִי וַיַּעֲנֵנִי** – “[I turned] to Hashem when I was in dire distress [Whenever] I called upon him, He answered me.” Even if the intensity of your *tefillah* only rises to a high level when you are in dire distress, don’t be reluctant to call upon Him for help at any time.

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

[120:2] VICTIMIZED BY SLANDER – **ה' הַצִּילָה נַפְשִׁי מִשִּׁפְּת שֶׁקֶר מִלְּשׁוֹן רְמִיָּה** – “Hashem, rescue my soul from false lips, a deceitful tongue.” If you have become the object of slanderous accusations, appeal to Hashem to save you and clear your name.

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

[120:3] THE EVIL OF SLANDER – **מַה יִּתֵּן לָךְ וּמַה יִּסִּיף לָךְ לְשׁוֹן רְמִיָּה** – “You slanderer, what does a deceitful tongue give to you and what value does it add [to your life]?” Think carefully before committing the sin of harming another person’s reputation through slanderous or gossiping talk.

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

[120:5] EXILE – **אוֹיָהּ לִי כִּי גִרְתִּי מִשָּׁךְ** – “Woe unto me for I have dwelled in a drawn-out [exile].” Acknowledge the pain the Jewish people has suffered in this Exile, and plead with Hashem to relieve it.

[120:6] A BITTER FOE – **רַבַּת שְׂכֻנָּה לָהּ נַפְשִׁי עִם שׂוֹנְאֵי שְׁלוֹם** – “Too long has my soul dwelled with those who hate peace.” Ask Hashem for peace.

[120:7] – **אֲנִי שְׁלוֹם וְכִי אֲדַבֵּר הֵמָּה לְמִלְחָמָה** – “I [seek] peace but when I speak [to them], they are for war.”

## Sources

The primary source used in the interpretation of the *pesukim* of this mizmor are listed below.

- |                                 |                                       |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| בראשית רבה (צח:יח)              | א - רבי אברהם בן רמון, רד"ק, מלבי"ם,  |
| ה - רד"ק                        | רשר"ה, נר לרגלי                       |
| ו - מצודות, רשר"ה               | ב - מלבי"ם, אבן יחייא                 |
| ז - רש"י, מזמור לתודה, נר לרגלי | ג - רד"ק, מזמור לתודה                 |
|                                 | ד - אבן עזרא, רד"ק, המאירי, נר לרגלי, |

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