

Mizmor 121

“I Lift My Eyes”

Key Concepts

In this mizmor David offers moral support to the Jewish people at a future time when they are enduring the sufferings of Exile. He employs the imagery of his own recent experiences as a fugitive leading a band of loyal supporters into the mountains.

The mizmor begins with the people desperately asking from which direction a rescuer might be coming. They quickly come to the realization that Hashem is their only possible source of help.

The singer then assures the people that they are right to trust in Hashem for He has been actively protecting them and will continue to do so for all time.

Navigating Tehillim (1). This is the second in the series of 15 mizmorim to be sung by the Leviim in the *Beis HaMikdash* while standing on the 15 steps leading up from the women’s courtyard to the men’s courtyard.

Navigating Tehillim (2). Mizmor 121 is unique among the 15 Shir Hamaalos *mizmorim* in that it begins with the letter ל (Shir LaMaalos), alluding to a movement “to the rising steps.” This implies a transition from the hopelessness suggested by the ending of Mizmor 120 to a renewed sense of spiritual growth and trust in Hashem.

Exploring the Mizmor

PART 1. SCANNING THE HORIZON. Speaking in the name of his nation, David expresses the bewilderment of the Jewish people in Exile:

(א) שִׁיר לַמַּעֲלוֹת אֲשֶׁא עֵינַי אֶל הַהָרִים מֵאֵין יָבֵא עֲזָרִי: (ב) עֲזָרִי מֵעַם ה' עֲשֵׂה
שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ:

(1) A song of the steps. I lift my eyes to the mountains: “From where will my help come? (2) My help is from Hashem, Maker of heaven and earth.”

PART 2. RENEWING BITACHON. David consoles his people and assures them that their trust in Hashem will be rewarded:

(ג) אֶל יְהוָה לְמוֹט רָגְלֶךָ אֶל יְנוּם שְׁמֹרֶךָ: (ד) הִנֵּה לֹא יְנוּם וְלֹא יִישָׁן שׁוֹמֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל:

(ה) ה' שְׁמֵרָךְ ה' צִלְךָ עַל יַד יְמִינֶךָ: (ו) יוֹמָם הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ לֹא יַכֶּכָּה וְיָרַח בַּלַּיְלָה: (ז) ה' יִשְׁמְרֶךָ מִכָּל רָע יִשְׁמֹר אֶת נַפְשֶׁךָ: (ח) ה' יִשְׁמֹר צִאתְךָ וּבֹאֶךָ מֵעַתָּה וְעַד עוֹלָם:
 (3) He will not allow your foot to falter. Your Guardian does not slumber. (4) Indeed, He does not slumber and He does not go to sleep, the Protector of Yisrael. (5) Hashem is your Protector; Hashem is your [sheltering] Shade. He is at your right hand. (6) The [heat of the] sun will not strike you by day, nor [will the cold harm you under] the moon by night. (7) Hashem protects you from every evil. He protects your soul. (8) Hashem watches over your departure and your arrival, from now and forever.

Additional Thoughts

Another unique aspect of Mizmor 121 is that Hashem is referred to as *Shomer Yisrael* (the Guardian of Yisrael) and the concept of His *shemirah* (protection) appears six times within the short space of six *pesukim*.

The *meforshim* (commentaries) say that *Shomer Yisrael* is an allusion to Yaakov Avinu who was watched over by Hashem, even as he slept (*Parashas Vayeitzei*). Yaakov was a lone traveler and his experience was a precursor to the travels of his descendants through the Exile. In Yaakov's dream Hashem assured him, "Behold, I am with you and I will protect you wherever you go." (*Bereishis* 28:15).

The term *Shomer Yisrael* is highlighted in the daily *Tachanun* prayer, and there the concept of Hashem's *shemirah* is also repeated six times. So in effect when we say *Tachanun* we are calling to Hashem to provide us with the same *shemirah* of which David spoke in *Tehillim*.

Learning the Mizmor

PART 1. SCANNING THE HORIZON.

(א) שִׁיר לַמַּעֲלוֹת

This is the second **song of the steps**.

אֲשָׂא עֵינַי אֶל הַהָרִים
 מֵאֵין יָבֵא עֲזָרִי:

[The nation exclaims:] **I lift my eyes to the mountains** – אֲשָׂא עֵינַי אֶל הַהָרִים –
 as I scan the distant horizon and wonder, "**From where will my help come**" –

מֵאֵין יבֹא עֲזָרִי.

(ב) עֲזָרִי מֵעַם ה'
עֲשֵׂה שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ:

"But I know that looking up at the mountains will not avail me, for **my help is only from Hashem** — 'עֲזָרִי מֵעַם ה', and therefore it is to Him that I shall lift my eyes. He will gather me in from the nations and bring this bitter Exile to an end. For He is the **Maker of heaven and earth** — עֲשֵׂה שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ. Everything is in His power and He can do as He wishes. The nations who persecute me are like nothing against Him."

PART 2. RENEWING BITACHON.

(ג) אֵל יִתֵּן לַמּוֹט רַגְלֶךָ

[David consoles the nation:] It is good that you put your trust in Hashem. Although He has found it necessary to extend your Exile, **He** is concerned about your well-being and **will not allow your foot to falter** — אֵל יִתֵּן לַמּוֹט רַגְלֶךָ.

אֵל יָנוּם שִׁמְרֶךָ:

It may seem as though He is not paying attention to you, but **your Protector does not slumber** — אֵל יָנוּם שִׁמְרֶךָ, even momentarily. He is actively protecting you from your enemies and from every other danger.

(ד) הֲיֵנָה לֹא יָנוּם וְלֹא יִישָׁן
שׁוֹמֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל:

Indeed, since **He does not slumber** — הֲיֵנָה לֹא יָנוּם, **He** surely **does not** go into a deep **sleep** — וְלֹא יִישָׁן, and so there is not a minute when He fails to watch over you. **The Protector of Yisrael** — שׁוֹמֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל will not abandon His constant *hashgachah* (oversight). Even now He continues to perform hidden miracles to protect you."

(ה) ה' שִׁמְרֶךָ ה' צִלְךָ

Hashem is your Protector — ה' שִׁמְרֶךָ; **Hashem is your protective Shade** — ה' צִלְךָ. Just as a sheltering tree branch shields you from the heat of the sun, Hashem shields you from every kind of discomfort and illness.

עַל יָד יְמִינֶךָ:

He is always there, **at your right hand** — עַל יָד יְמִינֶךָ, to help you in everything you do.

(ו) יוֹמָם הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ לֹא יַכֶּכָּה

By day His shade protects you so that the intense heat of **the sun will not strike you** — יוֹמָם הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ לֹא יַכֶּכָּה.

וַיִּרְחַם בַּלַּיְלָה:

And He protects you from the damp cold which occurs **at night** when **the moon** — וַיִּרְחַם בַּלַּיְלָה makes its appearance.

(ז) ה' יִשְׁמְרֶךָ מִכָּל רָע

Hashem protects you from every evil — ה' יִשְׁמְרֶךָ מִכָּל רָע, by helping you resist the cultural influences of the nations through which you pass, so that you do not succumb to the forces of assimilation.

יִשְׁמֹר אֶת נַפְשֶׁךָ:

He protects your soul — יִשְׁמֹר אֶת נַפְשֶׁךָ, by helping you resist false religions and ideologies.

(ח) ה' יִשְׁמֹר צֵאתְךָ וּבֹאֶךָ

מֵעַתָּה וְעַד עוֹלָם:

The life of a refugee can be difficult. Going out on the road involves leaving familiar surroundings and the comforts of home. But **Hashem watches over your departure** — ה' יִשְׁמֹר צֵאתְךָ וּבֹאֶךָ so that the pain and stress of travel are minimized.

Arriving in a new land is also stressful because it involves adjusting to strange languages and people. But no matter where and no matter when, Hashem watches over **your arrival** — וּבֹאֶךָ. He will continue to stand by you throughout your life, **from now and forever** — מֵעַתָּה וְעַד עוֹלָם.

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* asking for your needs, or expressing your gratitude and

devotion to Hashem.

Lessons for Life - Your Attitude.

[121:2] HELP. – עֲזָרִי מֵעַם ה' עֲשֵׂה שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ – “*My help is from Hashem, Maker of heaven and earth.*” When you are faced with difficulties, look to Hashem. He created the world you live in and He is the only One Who can help you.

Tehillos for Life - Contemplation of Hashem.

[121:4] ALWAYS THERE. – הִנֵּה לֹא יָנוּם וְלֹא יִישָׁן שׁוֹמֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל – “*Indeed, He does not slumber and He does not sleep, the Guardian of Yisrael.*” You can be sure that Hashem is watching over you every minute of the day. Even when you are asleep, He is awake.

[121:7] UNIVERSAL PROTECTION. – ה' יִשְׁמְרֶךָ מִכָּל רָע יִשְׁמֹר אֶת נַפְשְׁךָ – “*Hashem protects you from every evil. He protects your soul.*” Hashem protects you from being swept away by cultural influences.

[121:8] ETERNAL PROTECTION. – ה' יִשְׁמֹר צֵאתְךָ וּבֹאֶךָ מֵעַתָּה וְעַד עוֹלָם – “*Hashem watches over your departure and your arrival, from now and forever.*” Hashem will always be there to protect you, even when you are far away from home, even when you are enduring the sufferings of Exile.

Sources

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

ו - רד"ק

ז - אבן יחיאל

ח - נר לרגלי

א - אבן עזרא, רד"ק, מצודות

ב - רד"ק, המאירי

ג - רד"ק, מלבי"ם

ד - רד"ק, המאירי, אבן יחיאל

ה - מצודות, מלבי"ם

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